University of Alberta

The Fruits of Her Labour:
Women, Rhetoric, and Reform in
The Essays of Hannah More

by

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter One
From High Priestess to Daddy's Girl: Hannah More's Critical Reception 16

Chapter Two
Setting the Context for *Strictures*: Hannah More's Evangelical Critique of Culture 34

Chapter Three
Amazons and Actresses: Performance versus Agency in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* 64

Conclusion
Beyond the Gender Binary: Hannah More's Critical Legacy 101

Works Cited 110

Introduction

After a century of almost unmitigated critical neglect, scholars are beginning to take Hannah More seriously. The eighteenth-century writer, educator, and reformer was a controversial figure in her own lifetime, garnering both warm praise and vitriolic criticism from her contemporaries. A self-professed anti-radical and staunch Anglican, More was never fully accepted by political conservatives or the religious establishment of her day. As a vocal and visible woman working for widespread social reform in a period of political unrest and instability, she was beset throughout her life by attacks from all sides of the ideological landscape. But as a keen strategist, savvy politician, and tireless advocate in her own right, she was always surrounded by supportive friends and effective allies. From her Sunday schools and literacy programs for the poor to her influence on the morals and mores of the middle- and-upper classes, More's impact on modern British society would be difficult to overestimate.

More was born into a middle-class family in 1745, daughter of a Bristol schoolmaster whose High Church loyalties were infused with Evangelical zeal and the influence of his own dissenting parents. The informal education she received from her father exceeded conventional limitations on serious learning for women: all five More sisters were taught a wide range of academic subjects including mathematics and Latin. Jacob More became alarmed, however, by his daughter Hannah's prodigious, and therefore unfeminine, skill in mathematics and refused to continue her arithmetic lessons in early adolescence. Soon after, he ended the Latin lessons as well. While she was later able to continue her Latin studies under the tutelage of Bristol Baptist minister James Newton, she never studied mathematics again. Not surprisingly, a sense of deep personal indignation about the random and superficial nature of women's education pervades her later writing. More's late teens were spent studying and then teaching at the girls' school established by her older sisters in Bristol in 1758. The school was remarkably successful, thriving for over three decades and providing the More sisters with enough income to build and maintain a comfortable home in a fashionable district of Bath for their retirement. More's early experiences as a schoolteacher would prove helpful in her later work establishing Sunday schools and writing tracts on religious and women's education. In her twenties, she moved in prestigious London literary circles, became associated with the Bluestockings, and wrote her own poetry and plays – several of which were performed on London stages with David Garrick. In her later years, More devoted herself to philanthropy, education of the poor, and writing religious and political treatises directed at social reform.

More wrote her first play while a young teacher in her sisters' school. *The Search After Happiness*, published in 1773, was initially intended for performance by her female students. The overtly didactic drama eventually went into twelve editions, and sold more than ten thousand copies. It draws heavily on traditional pastoral images and conventions, but it also depicts the ancient Shepherdess Urania as a benevolent maternal guide dispensing wisdom and truth to four young female searchers. Emphasizing the importance of inner virtue over outward appearance and worldly pursuits, the play introduces many of the central themes More was to treat in all of her subsequent works. Her first tragedy, a translation of Pietro Metastasio's *Attilio Regolo: The Inflexible Captive*, opened in Bath on May 6, 1775, and enjoyed a moderately successful run. Her second tragedy, *Percy,* was produced with the help and patronage of renowned actor

David Garrick. It opened on December 10, 1777, in London and ran for an impressive twenty-one nights. Immensely popular, it was published in a limited edition shortly thereafter and sold out all four thousand copies. Her third and final tragedy *The Fatal Falsehood*, had a disappointing four- night run in April 1779, its opening marred by Garrick's death in January of that year and Hannah Cowley's accusations of plagiarism. More publicly refuted the charges, which are thought to have been fueled by Cowley's frustration with her own professional failures, and widely recognized to be unsupported by circumstantial evidence and major differences between the plays in question (Demers 39-40; Stott 46-7). Cowley's response to More's defense was to suggest that her public measures showed "indelicacy" and "unsexual hardiness," and she repeated the charge in the preface to the printed text of her play *Albina* (Stott 46). Battle weary and disillusioned, More let rest her theatre ambitions. But in 1782 with *Sacred Dramas*, she returned to her pedagogical roots in drama; these final efforts were based on Bible stories and not intended for performance.

Even at the height of her success, More's relationship with the theatre was markedly ambivalent. The teacher in her delighted in the efficacy of communicating "embodied truth, made alive, furnished with organs, clothed, decorated, brought into sprightly discourse, into interesting action; enforced with all the energy of passion, adorned with all the graces of language, and exhibited with every aid of emphatical delivery" (qtd. in Demers 25). But she also mistrusted her own passion for a medium that was so prone to misappropriation, fearing the "temptation and seduction, of overwrought voluptuousness and unnerving pleasure" (*Works* 1837; 508). Once she decided that the stage could never be entirely "converted into a school of virtue," her moral qualms surpassed her personal passion, and she ended up renouncing the theatre later in life (*Works* 1837; 502).

Poetry proved a less problematic medium for her didactic purposes, and she published many well-received works, including the clever, much-celebrated portrait of her Bluestocking friends in "The Bas Bleu" (1786), and an influential abolitionist piece entitled "Slavery: A Poem" (1788). Aside from her formal works, More relied on verse for pedagogical purposes in a variety of ways, most notably in the ballads and poems of her *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795-1797) and *Bible Rhymes,* published at the end of her career in 1821. The *Tracts*, which also included short prose fiction and dialogues, were produced as a series of chapbooks, designed initially as a counter-revolutionary campaign to combat the influence of Painite propaganda. More appropriated the format and distribution tactics of popular street literature in order to appeal to lower-class readers with her message of bourgeois values and religious reform. Her strategy of 'disguising' her reformational agenda in a genre traditionally antithetical, even hostile, to middle-class morality has garnered harsh criticism from contemporary scholars. Susan Pedersen, for example, argues that More's Evangelical campaign was tantamount to "colonizing" popular culture for the sake of bourgeois and aristocratic self-interest, using the literary form of popular dissent to instill passive acceptance of the status quo (108).[1] But in his compendious study *The English Common Reader* (1963), Richard Altick marvels at the "staggering" sales figures for the tracts, noting that "two printing houses, Samuel

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[1] For other critical appraisals of More's *Cheap Repository Tracts*, see also Gary Kelly, "Revolution, Reaction and the Expropriation of Popular Culture: Hannah More's Cheap Repository"; Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819*; Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Their Fathers' Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Patriarchal Complicity.*

Hazard's at Bath and John Marshall's in London, were kept working at capacity to supply the English demands alone"(75). The *Tracts* were part and parcel of More's larger literacy campaign for the poor, and despite the controversy that her efforts garner today, her success was remarkable; in the words of Altick, "Tom Paine and Hannah More between them had opened the book to the common English reader"(77).

In 1808, More published her first and only novel. *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* represents in fictional form the principles and ideals of her conduct books, and was intended as a kind of antidote to the novels she perceived to be infecting the morals of the young – in particular, that "compound of genius and bad taste," Madame de Staël's *Corinne; ou, L'Italie* (qtd. in Stott 272). The hero of the novel is Charles, the "Coelebs" or celibate of the title. His quest for a virtuous wife takes him to the country home of his father's friend Mr. Stanley, and the Stanleys' eldest daughter, the practical, diligent, and learned Lucilla. Lucilla embodies More's ideals for female education: she excels in intellectual achievements, helps to manage her family's household with grace and skill, visits the poor, teaches the younger Stanley children, and tends the family garden with a passion for horticulture mirroring More's own. Providing an interesting contrast to Jacob More, Mr. Stanley has taught Lucilla Latin with enthusiasm: as he says, "her quickness in acquiring led me on, and I think I did right; for it is superficial knowledge that excites vanity" (*Coelebs* 275). Although the novel has been dismissed by critics since its initial publication as too doctrinal and overtly didactic to be considered a novel at all, it was remarkably popular in More's time. Her biographer Anne Stott reports that middle-class young women "eagerly devoured" the book despite the fact that it was "almost entirely devoid of incident" (Stott 277). *Coelebs* was an international bestseller: it went into ten editions in its first six months, shortly followed by four American editions; eventually, thirty editions of one thousand copies were printed in the United States alone (Stott 277).

More's commercial success in every genre she undertook was unprecedented, but arguably, it was in her extended essays that she truly flourished as a writer and a teacher of morals. Her force and skill as a rhetorician and her sharp intuitive grasp on the psychological subtleties of her readers were nowhere displayed as brilliantly. The essays themselves cover a wide range of genres. *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society* (1788) and *Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World* (1791) are part conduct books for the leisured classes, part incisive social commentary and cultural critique. With *Remarks on the Speech of M. Dupont* (1793) and *Hints towards Forming the Character of a Young Princess* (1805), More delves into political commentary, although the latter was also intended as a conduct book and educational guide for Princess Charlotte. *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) combines the conduct book with feminist polemic *and* includes an explicit statement of More's own Evangelical beliefs. *Practical Piety* (1811) and *Christian Morals* (1813) continue the work of social reform, but read in many places like sermons or theological tracts. *Essay on the Character and Practical Writings of St Paul* (1815) is explicitly exegetical, while *The Spirit of Prayer* (1825) articulates Evangelical doctrine in a devotional strain. Spanning roughly the last thirty-five years of her life, More's essays express many of the same ideas she initially put forth in her early plays and poetry, but articulate them in the confident voice of a mature and self-possessed woman, world-wise but not cynical as a result of years of controversy and defending herself from hostile critics, empowered with a firm belief in her own moral and religious authority.

Evangelicalism provided More with a foundation from which to claim this authority – an authority which, although frequently contested, was to extend beyond her personal circles to influence broader social currents on both sides of the Atlantic. Eighteenth-century Evangelicalism in England began as a movement to reinvigorate a fading institutional church. As such, it often constituted a strain within Anglicanism, and many High Church members, such as More's father and More herself, retained their Anglican allegiances while at the same time professing Evangelical principles. Accordingly, Anglican Evangelicalism was usually a matter of difference in emphasis rather than doctrine. In his well-known study of the movement, David Bebbington identifies the Evangelicals' four main concerns as conversion, practical activism, a preference for the Bible over Church dogma or abstract theology, and "crucicentrism," or a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (Bebbington 2-4). Equally crucial for the Evangelicals, however, was their emphasis on original sin and the need for redemption (Rosman 10). While none of these concerns lay outside the orthodox paradigm, they acted as the catalyzing principles of Evangelical campaigns for social and moral reform. Over time, Evangelicals developed their own specialized language to convey their particular brand of emotive piety and rational pragmatism. Such phrases as "vital religion," "the religious temper," and "religion of the heart" pepper More's own texts, often in conjunction with a call to approach all of life with a religious orientation.

The Evangelicals' firm commitment to the Church Order distinguished them from the more radical non-conformist groups, such as the Methodists. But they were largely sympathetic to the concerns and aims of the Methodists; early on in the movement, many even accepted the general designation of "methodist," although with some reluctance for fear of being associated with more socially disruptive congregations. As revolutionary fears intensified, so too did the Evangelicals' insistence on distancing themselves from radical dissenters, and what was largely perceived as Methodist anti-intellectualism and hostility to art, literature, and culture – not to mention the hallowed traditions and establishment of the Church. And yet, as Elisabeth Jay points out, despite the Evangelical commitment to the *principle* of Church order, "many still felt unable to blame a man for sitting under a Dissenting minister or crossing parish boundaries if this was his only recourse to Gospel preaching" (Jay 18). While lodged firmly within the establishment, many Evangelicals presented serious challenges to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. More herself was actually quite doctrinally lax, preferring to stress ecumenism and the simple fundamentals of faith rather than to quibble over theological fine print. But after the Blagdon controversy, in which she came under virulent personal attack from the religious establishment and political conservatives for the supposedly subversive activities being carried out in her Sunday schools, More was loath to be called a Methodist with all the excesses and political radicalism that such an appellation implied.[2] Although she championed the "religion of the heart," she would have no part of a theology that subjected the intellect and the reason to pure, ungoverned emotion, and was routinely critical of the dangers of what she called religious "enthusiasm."

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[2] From 1799 to 1803, More was engaged in a bitter public dispute with the curate of Blagdon, Thomas Bere, over charges of methodism and religious enthusiasm in her schools at Wedmore, Axbridge, and Blagdon. Bere, along with strong clerical and Anti-Jacobin support, launched a pamphleteering campaign against More, while More rallied her own troops in an effort to defend her reputation and keep her schools open. The personal attacks against More in the press and in Bere's pamphlets were largely misogynist, ridiculing her as "Scipio in petticoats" or "Pope Joan," and blatantly insinuating sexual misconduct. As Anne Stott points out, it quickly became clear that "the fundamental issue behind the Blagdon controversy was not the education of the poor or the conduct of [More's schoolmasters] but wider fears of Evangelical infiltration into the Church of England" (245). For further discussion, see Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The*

More is most closely associated with the Evangelicalism of the Clapham Sect, so called because its "members" lived for a time as a community in Clapham Common. Clapham's central figures were Charles Grant, Zachary Macauley, Henry Thornton, John Venn, William Wilberforce and their families. Also known (often derogatorily) as the "Saints," they were a wealthy, intellectual, and cultured group of upper-middle-class laymen who exerted significant political influence and devoted their efforts to social reform and the abolition of slavery. More's relationship with William Wilberforce was especially important for her own Evangelical activism: it was Wilberforce who first suggested the idea of establishing Sunday schools in the Mendips, and he provided much of the capital for this project that was to have such a lasting impact on More's outlook and reputation – for good and for ill.

Along with their Puritan predecessors, the staunch moralism of the Evangelicals has typically received negative press. Boyd Hilton argues that "political evangelicalism" in England "was born in an atmosphere of guilt, alarm, and perplexity during the early 1780s," and that the fundamental social and constitutional conservatism of Evangelicals was rooted in their "sense of man's sinfulness" (Hilton 205). Revolutionary fears aside, in the optimistic intellectual atmosphere of the Age of Reason, their emphasis on man's depravity appeared to many as dour as it does to

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First Victorian, pp. 232-257; Mitzi Myers, "'A Peculiar Protection': Hannah More and the Cultural Politics of the Blagdon Controversy."

us today. Their fervent belief in Providence and the divinely ordained social hierarchy often resulted in a morally questionable, if not repugnant, political quietism. On the other hand, because the anti-establishment and individualistic elements inherent in Evangelical theology also fostered a thoroughly radical contingent, both moderate and extreme forms of Evangelicalism attracted large numbers of the lower and working classes.

Both within and outside of the institutional Church, the movement also counted women among its most numerous and loyal adherents. Bebbington reports the comments of "a rather jaundiced ex-Methodist" regarding the overrepresentation of women: "I have heard Mr. Wesley remark that more women are converted than men; and I believe that by far the greatest part of his people are females; and not a few of them sour, disappointed old maids" (25). According to Bebbington, the available statistics confirm this derogatory portrayal, as unmarried women did indeed fill the ranks of zealous converts. Interestingly, he speculates that this brand of religion "may have provided psychological reassurance, even emotional outlet, for this section of the population" (26). While this interpretation implies a rather patronizing attitude, we should also consider the possibility that many women actively sought out the opportunities for leadership and empowerment afforded them in Evangelical congregations – opportunities that far exceeded those offered in traditional Anglican congregations, such as prayer and praise leadership, counsel and exhortation, and in some cases, even preaching (Bebbington 26).

In *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse* (1993), Christine L. Krueger offers a more comprehensive treatment of women's role in Evangelical movements. This highly insightful work considers the history of women's social writing in terms of a female preaching tradition beginning with the early Methodist women preachers of the 1760s and 70s and culminating in the works of the "extraordinary prophet" George Eliot (Krueger 234). Krueger also discusses More's seminal role in this tradition, noting her immense influence on nineteenth-century women's social discourse and detecting in her counter-revolutionary stance a feminist rebellion against "the hegemony of the male voice" in "the triumph of atheistic rationalism" (Krueger 110). Social historians have long noted the democratizing forces within Evangelicalism; Krueger deftly adapts this argument to explain the prevalence of women in the "religion of the heart" without resorting to patronizing dismissals of their need for an emotional crutch. According to Krueger, "evangelical hermeneutics and the practices which followed, by decentering exegetical authority, encouraged women to bring into public (i.e. male) view – and specifically, into social discourse – a significant facet of their activities as readers and writers" (5). By renewing a Reformational emphasis on the individual's relationship with God and right to interpret Scripture, Evangelicalism allowed many women, especially the well-educated, to bypass institutional constraints on their formal ecclesiastical roles. Essentially, casting themselves as latter day Deborahs, Evangelical women used the sanction of divine authority to usurp (to a degree) patriarchal authority.

Along similar lines, in her study of aristocratic female patrons of religion, Helen M. Jones explores the ways in which Evangelicalism allowed many women to exploit "loopholes in their society's mores" (Jones 89). She describes how wealthy, powerful women such as Lady Betty Hastings, Ladies Glenorchy and Maxwell of Scotland, and Lady Huntingdon built chapels for their estates, hand-picked local clergy, and then wielded considerable control over the religious life of their parishes. Arguing that

Evangelicalism proved especially amenable to female authority, Jones notes that it "was peculiarly a religion of the home [...] Such a religion could and did lead to an enhancement of the role and moral authority of the women whose domain the home was" (90). Consequently, although the subjects of Jones' case studies exerted authority even over leading male clergy, they did not transgress the bounds of female propriety. As Jones explains,

> Whilst the public-private dichotomy is too inadequate a model to represent entirely the realities of any woman's life in the eighteenth century, its language can in some measure elucidate what was happening here. These women were pursuing private activities in a public way – using private spaces, such as their own chapels and homes, for what became public gatherings: in other words, making the private, public. (Jones 89)

More's social discourse – her extended essays directed at social, political, and moral reform – also make the private public, in a remarkably explicit and powerful way. Although she exploited many of the same theological and societal loopholes as, for example, Methodist women preachers or aristocratic female patrons, More's comprehensive reform agenda placed her firmly within the social mainstream, and more directly under the public gaze than any other woman Evangelical of her time. Arguably, her efforts were also more successful than her more obscure counterparts, yielding more concrete results in the way of effecting social change. Jones concludes that the long-lasting consequences of the activities of wealthy female patrons were impressive despite their limited sacramental and institutional status. These women set a precedent by which

> women as a whole were increasingly respected as being able to form their own judgments on religious matters, to hold well-thought-out doctrinal positions which affected the way they lived their lives, to be sources of moral influence over others than just their children and servants, and to have demonstrable administrative and organizational skills. (Jones 93)

In her essays, More advocates more than such modest moral and domestic authority for women – a complete reformulation of the categories of politics, morality, and the gendered separation of spheres. Although she was a participant in broader social currents that extended well beyond her own individual contribution, More's feminized Evangelicalism constituted a vision of social reform with teeth.

And yet her characteristic mix of sharp-tongued moralism, an exacting religious sensibility, and the dire seriousness that colours all her writing make it difficult to embrace More as a feminist heroine. Indeed, these traits make it difficult even to read her corpus in its entirety, with its lengthy, unexciting titles and often scolding, condescending tones. A More text, while challenging, invigorating, and stirringly aggressive, is also draining in its verbosity and repetitiousness, in the sheer amount of energy required to keep pace with her unrelenting, almost obsessive rhetoric. And many scholars, it would seem, are not convinced that such an effort would pay off. By all accounts a prudish spinster, More is utterly lacking any of the romance and sexual intrigue that spark interest in the lives of her contemporaries Mary Wollstonecraft and Catherine Macauley. But more importantly, she categorically rejects their radical politics as well as the basic egalitarian principles of a democratic society. Consequently, when she is not dismissed out of hand, More is deemed hopelessly inconsistent, transgressing by the very act of speaking and writing publicly those limits she reinforces in her commitment to a militantly conservative Christianity.

Of course, consistency can be a highly overrated virtue, and More was a complex, multi-faceted woman. Politically savvy, she was always mindful of her audience, often tailoring her message to suit the aim or occasion. Indeed, this was a woman who once wrote of her *Cheap Repository* project, "I feel that the value of a thing lies so much more in its usefulness than its splendour, that I have a notion I should derive more gratification from being able to lower the price of bread than from having written the *Iliad*" (Roberts vol.1; 536). In other words, concrete effect rather than artistic unity or even logical coherence was More's overriding goal. But she was deeply concerned with *moral* consistency; in fact, this was one of the hallmarks of her calls for social reform, and diatribes against inconsistent Christians are reiterated in every one of her extended essays. How is that a woman profoundly concerned with moral integrity and consistency has come to be defined as the epitome of paradox and patriarchal ambivalence?

Despite the shifting currents and the ever widening scope of the feminist literary canon, More's contribution to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century feminism has yet to be fully appreciated. Although her most explicitly feminist tract, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), has been studied more often and more extensively than much of her other work, these preliminary treatments have only scratched the surface of this richly complicated text. In my estimation, recent historiographical insights about eighteenth-century gender roles and the public/private distinction can serve to illuminate key aspects of this work as well as More's larger reform program. Accordingly, I will read *Strictures* in the context of her wider agenda as presented in *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society* (1788), *An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World* (1790), *Remarks on the speech of M. Dupont* (1793), *Practical Piety* (1811), and *Christian Morals* (1813). Although the conduct book for Princess Charlotte, the essay on St. Paul, and her final work *The Spirit* *of Prayer* are equally instructive, for the purposes and the scope of this thesis, I have chosen to limit my focus to those tracts that deal explicitly with social reform.

Such an historicized and contextualized reading of *Strictures* shows that, far from being riddled with contradiction, More's feminist vision was unified, strongly informed by her aggressive agenda for widespread social, moral, and political reform, and determinedly constant throughout her long life. I will argue that her message to women in *Strictures*, her critique of social and cultural mores, and her own political activism do not represent divergent strains of a woman divided by inner tensions and paradoxes, but rather integral aspects of a persistent and universally directed Evangelical mission. While More's recalcitrance to the critical trends and popular values of *any* era makes it unlikely she will ever be embraced as a feminist heroine, it is precisely her prickliness – her resistance to idealization – that makes her work invaluable as an instructive challenge to our own taken-for-granted assumptions and the inevitable conceptual boundaries that define and limit contemporary feminist inquiry.

Chapter One

From High Priestess to Daddy's Girl: Hannah More's Critical Reception

Hannah More's life spanned eight momentous decades in England's history. Her books, tracts, and pamphlets sold in the thousands in Europe and the United States, making her the most financially successful woman writer of her time. She has been called a "Bishop in Petticoats" and the "High Priestess" of the Evangelical movement (Krueger 111; Bradley 19). But the complexities of her life and thought and her immense contribution to women's history in particular have been largely overlooked and unexplored by feminist and eighteenth-century scholars alike. Considered a sanctimonious prude, a reactionary, and an antifeminist, More is often invoked as the antithesis to the much lauded Mary Wollstonecraft. Even more regrettably, she is often characterized as a mere mouthpiece for bourgeois, Evangelical conservatism and harbinger of repressive Victorian morality. In this view, More's activism and later writings are seen as conventional expressions of the reform movement initiated by prominent clergy such as Bishop Beilby Porteus and Evangelicals such as William Wilberforce and Henry Thornton: in other words, More as handmaiden to the powerful men in her life. Although this image is still firmly entrenched, a handful of scholars have begun to reassess More's literary and historical contribution, suggesting more nuanced and positive interpretations of her life's work. In this chapter, I will establish More's current status in contemporary feminist criticism; in so doing, I will be examining some of the central assumptions of recent feminist theory – assumptions I hope to question through my own examination of More's work. This conceptual overview will also include a discussion of the private/public dichotomy that has been so crucial for critical appraisals of More, and which figures prominently in her own writing.

Mitzi Myers' important early article in the vein of More rehabilitation, "Reform or Ruin: 'A Revolution in Female Manners'" (1982), challenges readings of More and Wollstonecraft as diametric opposites. Myers presents a powerful argument problematizing traditional historiographical categories such as "radical" and "conservative" when it comes to women's political positioning, and argues that "the drift of More's explicitly conservative message is toward a liberating reworking of feminine ideology"(1982; 209). In her work on More's *Cheap Repository Tracts*, Myers argues that her counter-revolutionary attack on popular culture articulates an empowering, woman-centred domestic ideology, seeks to serve "woman-defined ends," and invests women's domestic and philanthropic activities with political significance (Myers 1986; 278). Most recently, in an essay entitled "'A Peculiar Protection': Hannah More and the Cultural Politics of the Blagdon Controversy" (1994), Myers continues the project of formulating a subtler, more complex approach to women's history by exploring "what Evangelical ideology meant to women – what it offered, why it appealed, where it constrained," using as a case study More's participation in the Blagdon controversy (Myers 1994; 232). With refreshing equanimity, Myers concludes, "Neither spotless martyr nor monster of dissimulation, not just an Evangelical, but a female Evangelical, More was a woman enmeshed in cultural politics" (1994; 243).

Kathryn Sutherland suggests a similar reading of More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* in her article "Hannah More's Counter-Revolutionary Feminism" (1991). Sutherland, however, argues that More's counter-revolutionary, Evangelical grounding provides a "whole battery of woman-directed discourses" that are in fact *more* effective than Wollstonecraft's "purloined masculine enlightenment prose" for instigating domestic reform and a subsequent expansion of women's scope of agency (Sutherland 36). Central to Sutherland's reading is her analysis of the changing economic landscape of the late eighteenth-century, when a redefinition of virtue designed to serve the interests of a commercial society invested the economy of the household with national economic importance. According to Sutherland, More's emphasis on woman as the productive centre of the domestic unit serves to re-position women advantageously in the public economic sphere. This radical re-positioning, argues Sutherland, "makes of [More's] muscular philanthropy something more than a dream of female power" (61). More recently, Angela Keane formulates a related argument regarding the revolutionary potential of More's counter-revolutionary politics, although she suggests that many of the radical consequences of More's activism were unintentional and "unforeseen" (Keane 2001; 110). And while Sutherland focuses on the economic dimension of More's domestic reformation, Keane emphasizes the ultimately "transgressive nature" of More's Evangelical philanthropy (Keane 125).

In addition to these reassessments of individual works and genres in More's corpus, several recent biographies have sought to present a fuller, more balanced picture of her life and work in general. In *The World of Hannah More* (1996), Patricia Demers offers a measured and insightful view of More's complexities as a thinker, writer, reformer, and woman. Significantly, Demers takes to task the widespread perception that More's later religious writings, *Practical Piety* (1811), *Christian Morals* (1812), *An Essay on the Character and Practical Writings of Saint Paul* (1815), and *The Spirit of*

Prayer (1825), constitute "the unfortunate consequences of a radical conversion to Evangelicalism" in the latter part of her life (119). In contrast to this claim, which usually serves as evidence in support of considering More a mere devotee of Wilberforce, Demers points out the "remarkable homogeneity of [More's] thought over almost half a century" and stresses the continuity of More's central concerns from her early plays to the dense but forceful and often poignant reflections of a frustrated preacher approaching the end of her life (119). Without whitewashing the shortcomings of More's rigid outlook, Demers presents her as "a complex human phenomenon" (Demers 132). Her work thus signals an important shift towards the fulfillment of Myers' earlier calls for a feminist hermeneutic that moves beyond simplistic binaries and the reductionism they entail.

The publication of a new biography by Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (2003), solidifies More's rehabilitation as an important female figure worthy of critical attention. Like Demers, Stott attempts to "highlight More's complexity," argues that "her conservatism was thoughtful and subtle," and that "she was never a mere mouthpiece for patriarchal ideologies" (x). Unlike Demers, however, Stott restates the conversion thesis, arguing that More's life was "divided" by this "watershed" experience; she also tends, in the spirit of earlier More criticism, to devalue the merit of her later religious writing. Although Stott's work challenges perceptions of More as an antifeminist, she is less sympathetic to More's religious beliefs, and as a result, concludes that More "died bewildered and angry at political change, without recognizing her own contribution to the new order" (Stott 307). The picture of More that emerges in Stott's biography is indeed complex, but this complexity is often presented as a function of fundamental contradictions and paradoxes that Stott sees running throughout More's work and life. While Stott frequently points out the ways in which More's conservatism was tempered by some of her more liberal concerns, implicit in her portrayal is the assumption that More's (illiberal) political and religious commitments necessarily contradict the feminist elements in her writing and political activism. In Stott's estimation, More made great gains for the early feminist or proto-feminist movement, but these gains were won *in spite of* her blind dogmatism and ideological inconsistency.

In her depiction of More as fundamentally paradoxical, Stott echoes, albeit with more subtlety, one of the central accusations levied against More by her most vehement critics. Articulating a common perception, Kathryn Kirkpatrick argues that More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* serves to incarcerate middle-class women in the domestic sphere while her *Cheap Repository Tracts* advocate a parallel dispossession of the working classes: "Both groups are enjoined to accept their limited sphere and to equate earthly privation with heavenly privilege" (Kirkpatrick 220). Moreover, Kirkpatrick bristles at the apparent hypocrisy of More's message: "How does a woman, fettered by the prescriptions of docility, modesty, and chastity, confined to the 'domestic enclosure' of the home, enter the public realm of discourse on propriety without violating the very codes she is engaged in putting forward?" (Kirkpatrick 213). Despite their ultimately divergent views, on this point Kirkpatrick and Stott agree. According to Stott, More's message throughout *Strictures* is "mixed to say the least," and although she notes the overall similarity with Wollstonecraft's *Vindications*, she writes that More's work is fraught with "contradictions and inconsistencies" as she both advocates improvements for women's education and makes "the usual separation between the female domestic and the male public sphere [...] confining women to the domestic realm" (Stott 224; 221).

Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace attempts to explain this apparent contradiction by suggesting that More is divided by virtue of her identification with patriarchal authority – in Kowaleski-Wallace's words, More was "in league with patriarchy" (1991; 29). In her psychoanalytic deconstruction of More, Kowaleski-Wallace contends that she, along with many other eighteenth-century literary women, "allowed themselves to be seduced by a masculine literary discourse and by the apparently benevolent patriarch who was the bearer of that language" (11). Such female identification with the "fathers" – in More's case, her actual father, Milton, Johnson, Wilberforce, and finally, Christ himself – creates an inherently paradoxical position, as the woman is torn between her sexuality and her paternal allegiance. Kowaleski-Wallace actually refers to More and her contemporary Maria Edgeworth as "daddy's girls" (vii). In her treatment, the perceived contradictions running through More's work and life are the literal manifestations of her anxious desire to control her own potentially "explosive" physicality and result in an incapacitating "self-division" (91).

With greater discernment, in *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall note some of the positive implications of More's Evangelicalism for middle-class women. But they too emphasize "the contradictions between the claims for women's superiority and their social subordination" inherent in More's writing. Echoing Kirkpatrick's bemusement at More's seeming hypocrisy, they point out the "irony" of her picture of feminine domesticity in her novel *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*: "the novel was written by a woman, a woman who never married, who carried considerable respect in the public world of religion and letters, ran a successful school and always maintained an independent life" (171). Interestingly, however, they also argue that More's contradictory ideas about femininity were not inherently conservative, and "indeed many of them were later detached from this set of theories [...] and rearticulated to a more radical view of the potential power of a woman's influence" (171). In other words, according to Davidoff and Hall, aligned with radical politics, More's conception of femininity becomes a legitimate and effective source for female empowerment, but aligned with conservative politics, it is contradictory and constraining. Why we ought to assume that conservative politics – however we define "conservative" – always and necessarily constrain women is, unfortunately, a question left unasked and unanswered.

Therefore, despite a wide range of theoretical frameworks and ideological sympathies, the notion that More is characterized by a basic contradiction insofar as she reinforces the separation of gendered spheres while she herself transgresses those boundaries, and that this central contradiction gives rise to a myriad of inconsistencies in her written work, is one largely shared by her critics and defenders alike. Even Mitzi Myers, perhaps More's staunchest champion, concedes that "a More text is [...] rife with latent contradictions and undrawn conclusions" (1982; 209). Whether this characterization is painted as hypocrisy or complexity (or patriarchal complicity) depends upon the sympathies of the critic, but it remains an unquestioned assumption nonetheless.

The conception of More as contradictory is one that profoundly affects not only interpretations of her work, but which works are considered worthy of study in the first place. In another recent biography, Charles H. Ford titles his first chapter "The

Ambivalent Moralist"; his central argument is that More was more radical and subversive than she often appeared (Ford 1996). His tactic is to unlock "the secrets of Hannah More [...] deciphering her often coded and ambiguous passages" (xi). He thus attempts to provide "glimpses of the sometimes angry woman behind the always proper lady" (xi). For Ford, More's seeming contradictions may be resolved by the possibility that she actually encoded a radical – and therefore appealing to contemporary minds – message in terms socially acceptable for her patriarchal milieu. While such an approach can serve to elucidate More's political adroitness, it can also lead to selective reading – looking for those elements in More that sound most like Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, and neglecting those we find distasteful or disturbing. To Ford's credit, he seeks to answer those critics whose "contempt" for More is rooted in their tendency "to appreciate only those women writers of the past whose ideas and tactic resemble current practices" (xi). While such a project is highly laudable and much needed, by attempting to "decode" More, Ford ends up doing something quite similar to what he opposes – appreciating only those elements of More that resemble current values.

Such attempts to make More "fit" contemporary categories inevitably result in unconvincing anachronisms. They also tend to tell us more about our own assumptions and ideals than the women whose histories we are purporting to study. Neither sexual libertarian nor the tortured, tightly wrapped daddy's girl of Kowaleski-Wallace's portrayal, More maintained many long and rewarding friendships with men *and* women. With her sisters, she established a thriving, bustling household from which to launch her various and ambitious projects, despite a lifelong struggle with migraine headaches and digestive disorders. Beyond our own theoretical predilections, there is little to suggest that the central preoccupation of this full and impressive but difficult life was the containment of explosive appetites behind a façade of devout celibacy. Neither Burkean conservative nor closet radical, More explicitly and forcefully criticized the decadence and corruption of the ruling classes, and just as forcefully rejected the revolutionary language of rights on religious grounds, placing herself dangerously at odds with both ends of the political spectrum. Her conception of ideal femininity, while it cannot be "deciphered" in any way that mitigates its carefully drawn boundaries and essential prescriptions, need not be realigned with radical politics in order to empower women. Although she was undoubtedly defined and limited by her age in many ways, her marginal status, as a woman and as an Evangelical, renders problematic easy associations with traditional historical categories.

The interpretation of More as advocating separate spheres for men and women in the first place is itself shaped by a particular model devised by gender historians to describe a shift in social and economic organisation over the course of the seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth- centuries with the rise of capitalism: the separate spheres model and its concomitant distinction between private and public. In order to conceive of More as fundamentally paradoxical, we must take for granted the validity of this model; or, at least, we must assume that "private" and "public" meant to people living in the eighteenth-century and to More herself exactly what it means to us today. Significantly, however, although More expostulates at great length on the differences between the sexes, and on the precise kinds of occupations suitable for each, she does not formally distinguish between private and public spheres. She *does* sharply delineate between the domestic realm and what she often refers to as "the world," but this distinction operates in a multiplicity of ways quite different from our own contemporary notions of a private/public dichotomy, and is invested with religious rather than gender significance.

My reading of More is well supported by recent developments in gender and eighteenth- century historiography, as scholars are increasingly questioning the accuracy and analytical purchase of the separate spheres model. To date, these developments have yet to be applied in feminist literary studies in any systematic way to the task of re-evaluating the history of women's writing in general or the contribution of Hannah More in particular. In her groundbreaking 1993 article, "Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history," Amanda Vickery presents an incisive critique of the two dominant narratives informing the history of British women's changing roles: on the one hand, the story of the marginalization of middle-class women by virtue of a nineteenth-century separation of the spheres of public power and private domesticity, and on the other, the seventeenth-century marginalization of propertied women and the degradation of working women as a consequence of capitalism (Vickery 1993). According to Vickery, the two interrelated narratives have provided an "alluring big picture" and thus a powerful impetus for academic women's studies across disciplines, but fly in the face of historical evidence (413). While Vickery acknowledges that the model has "done modern women's history a great service," she concludes that its inadequacies as a conceptual device and the historical inaccuracies it engenders mean that "the orthodox categories of both seventeenth-century and nineteenth-century women's history must be jettisoned if a defensible chronology is to be constructed" (413).

Vickery locates the origin of the story of capitalism and the marginalization of women in the nineteenth-century itself – not surprisingly, in the writings of Friedrich Engels and the first generation of female professionals, who argued that women were "infinitely better off before the coming of commerce" (Vickery 402). Consistent with the larger Marxist vision, Engels and his early feminist supporters predicted that the overthrow of capitalism through a communist revolution would restore equality between the sexes. In so arguing, notes Vickery, "these pioneer thinkers engendered a compelling vision of a precapitalist utopia, a golden age, for women. [...] At the same time, they sketched a social, cultural, and economic transformation so abstract that it could be applied to almost any region or historical period" (402).

This universal applicability means that, while Vickery focuses on the writing of seventeenth- and nineteenth-century history, Judith M. Bennett observes the same argument at work in medieval and early modern historiography. Echoing many of Vickery's concerns, Bennett challenges the "great transition" paradigm, or the notion that a social and ideological chasm exists between the medieval and early modern periods, a chasm engendered, once again, by the emergence of capitalism, and one which served to severely limit and disadvantage women. In its medieval version, the golden age for women workers in particular existed in the pre-capitalist feudal system, where a family economy united household and workplace and ensured partnership and relative equality between the sexes (Bennett 51). Bennett's reconsideration of historical data leads her to conclude that "the history of women's work provides exceptionally clear (and sometimes quantifiable) evidence not only of the low status of women's work in the middle ages [...] but also of a continuity between 1300 and 1700" (57). In other words, Bennett observes a consistent devaluing and restriction of women's work from 1300 until 1700, while Vickery observes similar continuity from 1700 until 1900. So why the perpetual claims of dramatic declines and heroic recoveries? Bennett argues that the "great transition" – in its many manifestations – persists because it suits contemporary critical assumptions and authoritative theoretical models so well, especially Marxist historiography but also "our presumptions about the problems and evils of our own society and our longings for another world" (49).

Even more applicable to the case of Hannah More is Lawrence E. Klein's 1995 article, "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth-Century." Following Vickery's lead, Klein challenges what he calls the "domestic thesis" put forward by many eighteenth-century women's histories, which uses the binary oppositions of male/female and public/private to paint a picture of increasing female marginalization in the private sphere and exclusion from public roles and politics. While Vickery's and Bennett's studies suggest a picture of women's history that is depressing in its uniformity, Klein debunks the same myth by pointing out the ways in which eighteenth-century English society in particular afforded women a kind of extra-institutional or unofficial but real and effective political power. By arguing that both "public" and "private" carried multiple meanings in the eighteenth-century, Klein suggests that "there is no one 'public/private' distinction to which interpretation can confidently secure itself" (Klein 99). In light of this "mobility of meanings," Klein contends that "modes of public life were both discrete and overlapping in ways that assured that the linguistic usages attached to them were always complex and sometimes contradictory" (103). In consequence, in a great many ways, women in the eighteenth-century consciously and actively participated in a variety of public domains, including a broadly defined political sphere that lay outside the institutional political apparatus. The crux of Klein's argument is that institutional and theoretical exclusion does not necessarily translate into practical exclusion. But even on the level of theory, Klein contends that eighteenth-century usage of the terms themselves did not link the private and the public with a spatial distinction between the home and outside the home. On the contrary, Klein notes that "privacy was ascribed to forms of life that we would consider public. Second and more important, people at home, both men and women, were not necessarily in private" (105). Clearly, such observations carry significant implications for our interpretations of eighteenth-century women's lives and writing.

It is obvious how the domestic thesis leads to a negative critical appraisal of More's conservative contribution: if the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries saw an ideological shift that served to justify women's exclusion from public power, then any writer, male or female, who instated the private/public split in social discourse actively contributed to the political and material losses suffered by all women. How the "great transition" thesis has informed critical reception of More's work is more complicated but equally significant. In Vickery's discussion of the thesis in its early nineteenth-century form, the same story recounted by Bennett is simply transposed onto a more recent time period. The shift from medieval feudal harmony to modern capitalist alienation becomes the "apocalyptic industrial revolution, 1780-1850, […] the midwife of modernity" and, consequently, of the marginalization of middle class women. Dramatic seventeenth- and eighteenth-century wealth creation, so the story goes, led to the practice of immuring women in the home as controlled, non-productive, and ornamental status symbols for the new economic man. As work and home became distinct realms, women were increasingly barred from the labour that had previously empowered them as productive social agents, and were themselves rendered commodities in the new free market.

In this telling, English Evangelicals, long blamed for creating the new repressive moral climate, are also faulted for fostering a new, unjust economic system. According to Boyd Hilton, the Evangelical emphasis on Providence and their consequent complacency regarding the social status quo of poverty and inequality was analogous to Smith's "invisible hand" – the only difference was that Evangelicals "believed that the 'hidden hand' held a rod [and] that the rod was wielded justly" (Hilton 114). While their support of laissez-faire government allowed the free market to flourish, their attitude towards money-making, as a sign of God's favour and the material reward of pious virtues such as diligence and self-denial, cultivated the fundamental impetus for capitalist development, the profit motive. In this configuration, the otherwise laudable Evangelical practices of charity and philanthropy also take on ominous shades, as such practices only perpetuate the basic system of inequality by temporarily alleviating the most obvious of its negative social effects. When nineteenth-century capitalism is in turn faulted for the marginalization of women, Evangelicalism becomes triply culpable: providing religious justification for class inequality, repressing women by virtue of its moral prohibitions, and limiting women's economic opportunities across class lines by virtue of its link with capitalism. In this schema, Hannah More, Evangelical extraordinaire, paternalist do-gooder, defender of the social hierarchy, and promoter of capitalist virtues, is easily construed as the epitome of unenlightened classism, antifeminism, and moral repressiveness; the fact that she herself is a woman only adds insult to injury, and her perceived hypocrisy often evokes personal dislike from otherwise fair and impartial scholars.

With so many cards stacked against her, it is not surprising that many attempts to understand More in a sympathetic light have tried to make her conform to contemporary sensibilities, or alternately, have predicated their analyses on the uncertain ground of her supposedly insoluble contradictions. Fortunately, the trenchant challenges to historiographical practices outlined above have made a more coherent and historicized reassessment conceivable. The groundbreaking insights of Vickery and Bennett are reflected in several recent anthologies of feminist historiography, as scholars are beginning to raise new questions in response to the increasing discomfort with a model that has informed and defined feminist inquiry for the past several decades. Generally speaking, this reassessment has led many scholars to shift their focus from women's victimization in history to their agency. In their introduction to a recent collection of essays on *Women in British Politics, 1760-1860* (2000), Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson observe that "boundaries between public and private worlds merged and overlapped. Contemporary issues could be renegotiated within the home, leading to discrete avenues for political expression" (9). In accord with Klein's findings, they note that, even as they were excluded from political institutions, eighteenth-century women also made active contributions in a wide range of more conventional, or "public," political arenas, "including electoral events, political trials and imperial governance" (Gleadle and Richardson 9). Similarly, Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus note that the essays in their 1997 collection, *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles,* *Representations and Responsibilities*, "reveal the complexity and multiplicity of gender roles in a society where the boundaries between 'public' and 'private', or 'social' and 'political', were blurred and permeable" (3).

As far as applying these insights to feminist *literary* history, Betty A. Schellenberg offers a preliminary response to what she sees as a reductionistic tendency among feminist scholars who use the gender binary as the fundamental interpretive category (Schellenberg 2003). Echoing Vickery, Schellenberg argues that the separate spheres model often creates the very "evidence" used to support it and thus serves to occlude serious study of the unique experiences of individual writers. Although she does not mention More in particular, Schellenberg notes that this model has served those authors "easily described as feminist and subversive" much better than other, more controversial figures, who are just as "easily dismissed as didactic, imitative, uninteresting" (77). In a particularly eloquent call for reassessment, Schellenberg writes that we must rethink our conceptual frameworks in order to free ourselves from the

> constraining picture of [women writers] working in the shadow of the dominant male writers of their day, condemned to having their literary aspirations shipwrecked on the rocks either of modest acquiescence or marginalized transgression. In the process, we may find new ways to talk about [eighteenth-century] women writers – as variously ambitious, variously successful, variously influential – even, as interesting. (88)

Despite this available arsenal of data and theoretical insight conducive to undermining simplistic binaries and generating more nuanced assessments of neglected women in our literary heritage, perceptions of More as hopelessly inconsistent – at worst regressive and at best *unintentionally* subversive – persist. Historiographical inquiries, such as Vickery's and Klein's, have tended to explore the discrepancy between discursive proscriptions and lived reality, and typically shun the didactic literature previously used to buttress the separate spheres framework in favour of alternate sources of data such as private family papers, letters, and parish records. While such practices illuminate the daily lives of women, in themselves, they do little to enhance our understanding of women's literary or textual output. Consequently, the brief mention More receives in Vickery's article is as dismissive as any analysis based on the separate spheres model: by way of criticizing current methodological practices, Vickery condemns the (exclusive) use of "the sanctimonious novels and sermons of Evangelicals like Hannah More, Mrs Sherwood and Mrs Trimmer, the didactic manuals of Sarah Stickney Ellis and her ilk, and the sentimental or chivalric fantasies of Coventry Patmore, John Ruskin, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and so on" for the purposes of deriving an accurate picture of Victorian gender roles (307). If Vickery's work is any indication, recent historiographical studies do not dispute the fact that writers such as More attempted to enforce the Angel-in-the-House model of repressive femininity, simply that "real" women actually heeded her advice. In both critical paradigms, therefore, More's texts are given short shrift by virtue of their resistance to existing theoretical frameworks.

And yet Vickery herself calls for a *complete jettisoning* of "the orthodox categories of women's history" (413). Even a less extreme measure, such as the mere recognition of the flexibility and permeability of such categories, would entail, at the very least, asking new questions about More's writing. For example, how do we interpret More's insistence on the natural differences between the sexes if we can no longer place them in the context of a larger ideological construction of the private/public dichotomy? Similarly, if the realms of private and public permeate and overlap, to what extent does

More's championing of women's domesticity actually entail a restriction of women's status and agency? Does the continuity thesis regarding women's work over the centuries imply that More's prescriptions simply uphold a gender separation that already existed, or does she appropriate and alter the traditional configuration in significant ways? Finally, if we can no longer take for granted the role of the unholy alliance of capitalism and Evangelicalism in the marginalization of women, how does this re-configuration affect our understanding of More's own religious and political commitments? In other words, can we see in her Evangelical program greater potential for female agency and empowerment than has been previously allowed? In the following chapters, I will suggest answers to the questions posed here. In so doing, I will attempt to articulate an interpretation of More's essays that avoids the Scylla of transgressive (and encoded) marginalization and the Charybdis of patriarchal acquiescence.

Chapter Two

Setting the Context for *Strictures*: Hannah More's Evangelical Critique of Culture

More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) begins on a strong, indignant, and declarative note: "It is a singular injustice which is often exercised towards women, first to give them a very defective education, and then to expect from them the most undeviating purity of conduct – to train them in such a manner as shall lay them open to the most dangerous faults, and then to censure them for not proving faultless" (311). With this introduction, More places her work in a well-established tradition of feminist polemics. As early as the seventeenth-century, writers such as Rachel Speght and Aemilia Lanyer launched critiques of patriarchy and women's inferior education on the basis on Scriptural authority: their charges of illogic and blasphemy against the practice of educating women into ignorance and superficiality were tantamount to exposing the socially constructed nature of patriarchal reality. More echoes even more directly early eighteenth-century writers such as Mary Astell and Mary Chudleigh, who attempted to deconstruct the authority of "custom" by arguing that prohibitions against women's intellectual and moral development were rooted in arbitrary convention rather than God-given, natural law. In a statement almost identical to More's, Mary Astell observed a hundred years earlier in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1700), "Women are from their very Infancy debar'd those Advantages, with the want of which, they are afterwards reproached, and nursed up in those vices which will hereafter be upbraided to them" (60). The notion that female limitations are acquired rather than innate thus became the crux of a wide spectrum of arguments defending women's intellectual and moral potential.

Another common concern shared by More and her foremothers was the fact that the typical women's education molded external attributes while neglecting internal qualities. In the same work, Astell laments "What a pity it is, that whilst your Beauty casts a lustre round about, your Souls which are infinitely more bright and radiant [...] shou'd be suffer'd to overrun with Weeds, lye fallow and neglected, unadorn'd with any Grace!" (54). In *Strictures*, More discourses on this theme with stunning rhetorical aplomb; the ferocity of her animadversions on the follies of feminine superficiality prompt the prefatory disclaimer that, had her intention been to enumerate the good qualities of women, she would have had no dearth of material, "but the office of the historian of human manners is delineation rather than panegyric" (311). While she recognizes her message may seem severe, her task is, first of all, to diagnose, secondly to prescribe a cure, but not to sing the praises of her sex. That this explicit intention be kept in mind is crucial when considering those particularly lacerating passages which, if taken out of context, produce the impression that More denigrated women by appropriating patriarchal authority.

On the contrary, individual authenticity rather than social role, inner character rather than outward appearance, and the centrality of education for redressing women's disadvantages – these are the pivotal themes of More's feminist vision. As such, she joins her voice in the chorus of eighteenth-century women writers whose powerful critiques of the construction of gender were rooted in deeper philosophical and religious concerns, and who sought, not to participate in the values of the male world, but to preach the superiority of their own. On this latter point, More in fact goes beyond the efforts of Astell and Chudleigh. Astell's "serious proposal," of course, was to establish an academy for women for the cultivation of mind and virtue in a cloistered, convent-like setting. Central to Astell's vision was the notion of a retreat from the world where women could join in community in protected seclusion. Similarly, much of Chudleigh's poetry celebrates withdrawal from the world to a safe haven of female friendship. For many early women writers, the prospect of women as independent agents in mixed society or the public world at large was unimaginable; moreover, to address their words to a general male audience would be an unconscionable (and dangerous) breach of modesty. Consequently, escape from the restrictions of a patriarchal society required a degree of physical sequestration, and the establishment of a separate domain they could call their own.

For More, on the other hand, the reformation of women's education and the elevation of women to their proper state was impossible without the concurrent reformation of men and the larger culture. In another way, the reformation of the world depended upon the reformation of women – especially middle- and upper-class women – whose God-given duty it was to forgo the pleasures of secluded retirement and venture forth into the world, providing an example of Christian charity and diligence to be followed by women *and* men across class lines. Thus, More's intent was not only to preach the superiority of feminine virtues, but to cultivate them *in the place of* worldly, and hence patriarchal, values. The audacity of her mission, undreamed of by earlier women, lay in her claim to moral and religious authority over and against the entire social order.

The continuity between More's message to women and her calls for general reform and the relative radicalism of her vision of women as moral agents in society become apparent when *Strictures* is read in the context of her own Evangelical "sermons" and her diatribes against worldly values. Indeed, her criticisms of women's acquired vacuity cannot be fully understood apart from her equally severe evaluation of the weaknesses and failings of men and male-dominated culture. Her *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society*, published anonymously in 1788, marked the beginning of what was to become an illustrious career as moral watchdog for the wealthy and leisured. Intended in part as a response to criticism of the Proclamation Society's attempt to suppress vice in the form of card playing on Sunday, the tract articulates many of the common complaints of Evangelicals about the irreligion and moral indifference of the upper classes and advocates a rigid sabbatarianism. It also marks a change in More's preferred genre, from the poetry and plays she produced in her teens and twenties to the extended polemical essays that dominated her literary output until the end of her life. Although many of the central concerns remained the same, *Thoughts* represents a more systematic turn in her thinking, as she refined her message and began to focus more intently on the practical application of her ideals; it also provides insight into the theological grounding of her feminist vision in *Strictures*.

More addresses her criticisms and suggestions to the "large and honourable class of the community" who are neither remarkably bad nor eminently virtuous, the benign and ordinary individual commonly considered "*a very good sort of man*" (262; 263). Her intention, as she states it, is to deal with those "petty domestic evils" that, while seemingly insignificant when considered in isolation, can accumulate to form the very character and quality of our lives (265). Concern for ordinary insouciance was common among Evangelical reformers, but More takes the customary recommendations for daily probity to new levels of rhetorical vigor. Far from distinguishing between various spheres, in More's configuration every facet of life is interconnected: the smallest infraction can acquire dire consequence in the mysterious scheme of Providence, and vigilance with regard to the smallest duty can help to redeem the character of the nation at large.

In her 1703 ode to Mary Astell, Mary Chudleigh rails against the "Tyrannick Custom" that robs women of their God-given dignity while she seeks solace in metaphysical contemplation (Chudleigh 67). With a tactical edge, More seeks change rather than solace, and advocates an unwavering "vigilance" directed at combating "the contagion of the general example" (*Thoughts* 262). As Chudleigh realized all too well, the dictates of custom are so firmly entrenched as to seem intractable; thus, More's dogged insistence on rooting out the "complaisant conformity" that perpetuates custom's reign can be construed as necessary rather than extremist (262). "Inconsideration, fashion, and the world" constitute the vicious triumvirate against which More sets her pen, and her deep awareness that she is attacking, not only particular values, but a common and seemingly benign human tendency towards unthinking compliance and habit is evinced by an ongoing self-reflexive commentary: "I am afraid I shall be thought severe" (263); "Let me here not be misunderstood" (264); "I know with what indignant scorn this remark will, by many, be received" (267); "I shall, probably, be accused of a very narrow and fanatical spirit" (268). Her critical self-awareness conveys the sense of the enormity of the task at hand – of the vast discrepancy between the social order she envisions and the one she finds in the world. When she turns this trenchant deconstruction of the selfish and sinful motives behind seemingly benign human actions to the particular issue of women's role in society, her apparently obsessive moralism becomes something similar to an incisive feminist hermeneutics of suspicion.[3] Her daring in such an ambitious project, when compared with the lesser though still controversial claims of earlier women seeking refuge rather than reform, is only underscored by attacks later mounted against her character and her modesty in response to her writing and activism. Contrary to claims that More curried patriarchal favour in order to preach down to other women, her fierce stance in *Thoughts* demonstrates her bold willingness to take on any opponent perceived as a threat to her Evangelical mission.

According to More, the tendency to differentiate between the spiritual importance of grand concerns versus daily minutiae results in a dangerous, because subtle, hypocrisy. While she recognizes the advancements of the "Age of Benevolence," she decries the fact that the same principles are not applied in personal matters, "[…] that a man may seem eager in redressing the injuries of half the globe, without descending to the petty detail of private virtues: and burn with zeal for the good of millions he never saw, while he is spreading vice and ruin through the little circle of his own personal influence!" (264). This propensity for ostensible adherence to abstractions while neglecting "the little, obvious, every-day, domestic duties" results in an unjust double standard: she points out that fashionable people are apt to deny their own servants the rights they would gladly extend to those "foreign parts" that have no bearing on their own personal lives (265). Her example of the injustice of hiring hairdressers on Sundays, while it seems ridiculous to anyone who does not share her strict sabbatarianism, nonetheless shows how literally and completely she conceives of the overlap between the public and the private.

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[3] Garrett Green defines "hermeneutics of suspicion" in terms of the critical assault against religion led by Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, as a moral rather than an epistemological challenge, "a suspicion of religious faith [which] undermines the credibility of religion by attacking not its objects of belief (at least not directly) but rather its motives" (Green 12). Over the course of the twentieth-century, many Christian theologians have actually appropriated hermeneutics of suspicion in order to root out "bad faith," and to bridge the divide between Christian traditions and an increasingly secular society (Green 201). Liberation and feminist theologians in particular have used the tools of suspicion to raise critical questions about the cultural and androcentric biases within the Biblical tradition. While any critical practice that subjects the Bible itself to suspicious scrutiny would be anathema for More, her own suspicion of *irreligious* "bad faith," firmly rooted in the Biblical paradigm itself, presents a sophisticated deconstruction of a different kind of false consciousness – the worship of fashion and unthinking conformity. For further discussion of feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, see Sally McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology.*

Her animadversions have real practical benefit as well. She holds absolutely accountable those men who would wax poetic about virtue and benevolence and maintain impeccable reputations as gentlemen, but then fail to put their principles into practice in their personal lives. She reminds them that "a small fault which is become a part of a system, in time establishes an error into a principle." (266). By elevating a domestic, pragmatic sensibility to the level of moral supremacy, More continually contrasts her homey wisdom with vague intellectualizing: "To take out only one thorn from a suffering patient, is more beneficial to him than the most elaborate disquisition on the pain he is suffering from the thorns which remain" (266). One must not only think rightly, but live virtuously, and the same standards for virtue ought to apply whether one is expounding a grand theory, acting in the world, or conversing with one's family in the privacy of the home.

More introduces here a construction that re-appears in her subsequent essays: by way of challenging the propensity to compartmentalize life in order to evade religious duty, she explicitly replaces the private/public dichotomy with a sharply drawn distinction between true Christian piety and a worldly spirit. For More, the notion that life's activities could be divided into various domains in which different sets of values applied was anathema, and her insistence on such a rigid standard of righteousness often appears to warrant her frequent disclaimers about fanaticism. Using the example of Ananias and Sapphira, she reminds us that right actions performed without a truly devoted heart are more dangerous than flagrant but unhypocritical neglect of duty: "Outward actions are the surest, and indeed, to human eyes, the only evidences of sincerity, but Christianity is a religion of *motives* and *principles*" (263). With the fervour of a fire-and-brimstone preacher, she delivers a stern warning about the shared fate of those who, like the unfortunate Biblical characters, combine polite decency with spiritual mediocrity.

In order to convey her holistic vision of the religious life, More simultaneously deflates those concerns typically considered of great public importance and elevates matters personal, private, or seemingly insignificant. Grand ambitions for "universal benevolence" are mocked as vain and evasive, as exercises in shirking the more difficult task of living selflessly and charitably in favour of self-congratulatory rhetoric and useless gestures. Interestingly, this is the same criticism More was to levy at revolutionary writers such as Tom Paine at the end of the 1790s. In this way, *Thoughts* very much prefigures her *Remarks on the Speech of Mr. Dupont.* In these and all her subsequent writings on the issue, her point remains the same: notions such as benevolence may have the ring of virtue, but as long as they are rooted, not in the Scriptural paradigm, but in an ideology that misunderstands the truth of (fallen) human nature, they are essentially devoid of meaning and can be used to manipulate rather than to liberate, to further the interests of worldly tyrants rather than the powerless or disadvantaged. As More's rejection of the language of rights is often assumed to constitute a rejection of rights in any form whatsoever, the positive implications of her argument for women are usually overlooked. In essence, the fundamental binary at work – worldliness versus piety – devalues those philosophical and political pursuits in which women faced the most formidable institutional obstacles. At the same time, her celebration of mundane virtue over abstract rights constitutes a legitimation of precisely those extra-institutional and domestic channels of social relations in which women had the greatest sway and latitude. Rather than affirm a rhetoric of rights that, on the ground, excludes women, More chooses to champion those avenues in which women enjoy greater autonomy. [4]

Realizing that such a strict application of religious duty may be perceived as a denial of public and worldly responsibilities, More also emphasizes that the consistency she advocates has for its aim the transformation of the world rather than a flight from it. Strikingly, her ideal for men's active virtue is identical to what she envisions for women in *Strictures*:

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[4] Feminist critics have often pointed out the essentially masculinist tenor of Revolutionary discourse (Krueger 1993; 109-111). Kathryn Sutherland argues that "what emerges from middle-class English political writings of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries is the radical male public betrayal of women"(35). Sutherland also notes that, long before the critiques of contemporary scholars, eighteenth century Frenchwoman and revolutionary moderate Olympe de Gouges demanded "O women, women, when will you stop being so blind? What advantages have you gained from the revolution? A more marked distrust, a more conspicuous disdain." Women are, de Gouges writes, "the sex which was formerly [under the old regime] contemptible but respected, and, since the revolution, has been respectable but scorned" (Sutherland 30).

> Let me not be suspected of intending to insinuate that religion encourages men to fly from society, and hide themselves in solitudes; to renounce the generous and important duties of active life for the visionary, cold, and fruitless virtues of an hermitage or cloister. No: the mischief arises not from our living in the world, but from the world living in us; occupying our hearts and monopolizing our affections. Action is the life of virtue; and the world is the theatre of action. (*Thoughts* 272)

In this passage, More does not reinstate a gendered binary, preserving a strictly male ethos while offering women the paltry consolation that their activities are superior in a spiritual sense only. Rather, her implementation of mundane and feminized virtue extends to men as well. As I noted in Chapter One, Lawrence Klein disputes the domestic thesis on the grounds that private and public were not always, or often, conceived of by eighteenth-century men and women as spatial designations separating the sexes into "home and not-home" (Klein 111). Here, More's internal, spiritual dichotomy between a worldly and an other-worldly orientation bears out his claim by explicitly rejecting the spatial dichotomy which would allow for precisely the kind of double standard she is at pains to undermine. Thus, for More, all of human life is carried out in "the world" – that is, far from constituting a realm set apart from politics and publicity, the domestic sphere sits at the heart of the social order and determines its moral character, while politics and other so-called public affairs derive meaning only insofar as they enact the domestic ethos (as More conceives it) of piety and pragmatic maternalism. The only true distinction to be made is between those actions which serve God and those which serve selfish human interests.

More continues her attack on upper-class hypocrisy and inefficacy with *An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World*, published in 1791. Despite her reputation as rigidly intolerant, both works avow her commitment to concrete effects and simple piety and her impatience with dogma and doctrinal difference. In *Thoughts*, she criticizes a narrow mind and exhorts the follower of true religion to "never consider whether the form suits his own particular taste, but whether the instrument itself is calculated to accomplish the work of his master" (273). In *Estimate*, she reveals the ecumenical spirit that would later manifest itself in her activities with the inter-denominational Bible Society: while lamenting the fact that "many a respectable non-conformist" is excluded from the religious establishment, she argues that "it is not dogmas or doctrines, it is not abstract reasoning, or puzzling propositions, it is not perplexed argument or intricate metaphysics" that impede belief, but a pervasive "practical irreligion" that vitiates the spirit of Christianity (277). As in *Thoughts*, here More undermines conventional perceptions by devaluing the grand and the abstract – whatever is removed from daily life and what has been traditionally associated with a masculine rationality – and elevating the seemingly mundane, the practical, and the trivial, traditionally considered fodder for the weaker female mind.

Again, rather than reinstating a gender polarity while simply reversing the natural hierarchy, More's insistence on the importance of a religious education for both sexes and the universal necessity for a strict regimen of Evangelical self-surveillance effects a kind of spiritual equality with practical implications. By this inverted, spiritual standard, men's greater degree of familiarity with and entrenchment in the world does not exclude them from the superior religious pursuits, but it does make the reformation and conversion of their characters much more difficult. Emphasizing the importance of "principle" in the formation of habits, More again attempts to "[lay] the axe to the root" of modern man's dissipation and moral laxity: the "root" in this case being the secular, Enlightenment philosophy that has spread from across the channel like a "contagion" (*Thoughts* 270). Touching on matters already sketched out in *Thoughts* and later developed in *Remarks on the Speech of M. Dupont* (1793), More perceives the threat to Christianity's authority in the new modes of thinking and responds with a vehemence considered by Anne Stott to be "nostalgic and backward-looking" (Stott 131). In line with standard Evangelical theology, More placed great stock in the doctrine of total depravity: her deep and pervasive consciousness of sin set her utterly at odds with the fundamental optimism about human nature that characterized Enlightenment thinking and that drove a movement away from traditional sources of authority and towards greater individual autonomy. Given her own assumptions about the human capacity for evil, More detected with great horror that, "Under the beautiful mask of enlightened philosophy, all religious restraints are set at nought" (*Estimate* 279). 7

In *Remarks*, More's response to the anti-clericalism of Dupont and Kersaint in the newly formed French assembly, this argument gains added force and urgency. While in *Thoughts*, she focused on the notion of benevolence, here Enlightenment ideals such as liberty and equality, while desirable in themselves, become meaningless and even dangerous ciphers when cut off from the God and the religion that gives them shape and invests them with meaning and efficacy. In the context of an atheistic discourse, such false ideals only serve the interests of the powerful. Consequently, in the declarations of Dupont and Kersaint claiming freedom from the oppression of the church and God, More sees a frightening potential for a return to a kind of Hobbesian state of nature when might made right and "all subsisted by rapine and the chase" (*Remarks* 309); she registers genuine disgust with the arrogance and "vanity" that would imagine such anarchy to be liberating (305). In More's estimation, only religion can protect the weak and vulnerable. When, therefore, she battles revolutionary rhetoric as though her own life and livelihood hung in the balance it is because, as a woman, that is how she felt:

> [Enlightenment secularism] is the laying the axe and striking with a vigorous stroke at the root of all human happiness. It is tearing up the very foundation of human hope, and extirpating every true principle of human excellence. It is annihilating the very existence of virtue, by annihilating its motives, its sanctions, its obligations, its object, and its end. (*Remarks* 307)

The fact that More objects to the Enlightenment view of human nature on the grounds that it is too permissive and optimistic certainly places her at odds with our own post-Enlightenment age. And yet, although we may dispute her ultimate conclusions, few at this point in history could argue against her gloomy prophecies about the inefficacy of the principle of "pure disinterested goodness acting for its own sake" to shape moral behaviour (287). More importantly, as dour and rigid as her prescribed "course of self-controul" may sound, the fact that she advocates such an apparently repressive regime for her *male* audience puts to rest any hint of patriarchal complicity. It also suggests the potential for a practical and political extension of her otherwise purely spiritual theory of gender equality. This latter point can perhaps be best illustrated by returning to the example of More's seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century predecessors, whose demands for a recognition of women's dignity and worth were rooted firmly in their appeal to Scriptural authority. Rachel Speght, for example, displays clever exegetical skills when she refutes the ridiculous misogyny of her pamphleteering opponent Joseph Swetnam: "yet was [Eve] not produced from Adams foote, to be his too low inferiour; nor from his head to be his superiour, but from his side, neare his heart, to be his equall" (Speght 18). Similarly, both Chudleigh and Astell depended to a large degree on the notion of women's spiritual equality as image-bearers of God in order to justify their rational development. For all three women, such radical challenges to patriarchal authority could only be imaginable on the higher ground of divine authority. Accordingly, to undermine the only source which had the potential to rein in and subsume male power and prerogative would constitute a devastating blow to their tenuous hold on the right to agency and a woman-defined identity.

More too subjects patriarchal authority to the higher will of God, a will that, given her anti-establishment Evangelical bent, can be tuned with remarkable ease to her own agenda and women's concerns in general. In contrast, the relative secularism of Enlightenment philosophy, with its emphasis on liberation from tradition and individual autonomy, renders each man subject only to his own conscience – and caprice – without any real external restraints. Moreover, in this schema, woman's supposed irrationality and dependence preclude a similar liberation and makes her subject to men who are themselves subject to no one. In this light, More's plea for an "adequate curb" on the passions and appetites, while it loses none of its moralistic rigidity, takes on a feminist edge. She castigates "young men" who, albeit because of a faulty education, "take custom and fashion as the ultimate and exclusive standard by which to try their principles and to weigh their actions" (284). Male worldliness leads to the adoption of such vices as a concern for reputation, pride, and a false sense of honour – vices which, incidentally, pose the greatest threat to mutual respect between the sexes (284).

Although neither *Thoughts* nor *Estimate* deals overtly with women's roles or gender-related issues, they both convey the feminized inversion of worldly values that More would later make explicit in *Strictures*. She portrays fashionable society, the business of the world, and all those domains considered public as ruled by an essentially pagan sensibility – elevating surface and form over depth and meaning. In More's estimation, women become slaves to these values just as readily as do men. But she also believes, in accord with traditional stereotypes, that these pagan virtues – the pursuit of glory and fame, the display of strength, prestige and power – are naturally masculine and that their Christian opposites – meekness, humility, piety, and charity – are inherently feminine. While it is commonplace to recognize how such an essentializing configuration has served to establish a gender-based double-standard, in More's obsessively consistent and pragmatically oriented critique of masculine culture, her celebration of feminized Christian values actually carries real political weight. If, as critics such as Kirkpatrick and Kowaleski-Wallace suggest, she had exhorted women alone to adhere to Christian docility, her reform program would indeed be tantamount to domestic incarceration for women with the empty promise of a heavenly reward. As it is, however, men – especially upper-class men – have the most to lose in More's vision of a social order in which outward success and power count for nothing and constitute dangerous temptations on the road to godliness.

Denying men all those so-called manly virtues which serve to separate the sexes along the familiar dichotomies – reason/emotion, culture/nature, logos/pathos, activity/passivity – as well as the masculine arrogance that would subvert divine authority, More insists that "religious principles" be "deeply impressed on the heart" through education and applied in men's business as well as women's (*Estimate* 285). The goal of men's education, she continues, should be the cultivation of a true gentleman, rather than the mere appearance of decorum. To achieve genuine "sweetness of manners," men should be inculcated with the fruits of the spirit: “love, peace, joy, long-suffering, gentleness, patience, goodness, and meekness” (*Estimate* 285). But More goes even further: not only does her inversion of patriarchal values extend to what we call the public sphere, she actually proposes to draw men away from their worldly pursuits to a more domestic grounding. Echoing and then expanding on sentiments expressed in *Thoughts*, More criticizes men who focus their sights on abstract values while neglecting “those more immediate objects of every man’s attention” (*Estimate* 288). With all the command of a divinely inspired prophetess, she instructs them to shun “the splendid deeds which have the world for their witness, and immortal fame for their reward,” to “cultivate the ‘unweeded garden’ of [their] own heart[s]; to mend the soil” and to “clear the ground of indigenous vices” (*Estimate* 289). Deeply aware of the trenchant resistance such restrictions on male freedom would elicit, she then changes her tone, coming close to biting sarcasm when she reprimands men for *their* weak submission to custom and fashion: “They often seem cautiously afraid of *doing too much* and *going too far*; and the dangerous plea, the necessity of *living like other people*, of *being like the rest of the world,* and the propriety of *not being particular*, is brought as a reasonable apology for a too yielding and indiscriminate conformity” (294). Here, More again demonstrates her concern for absolute consistency: men, like women, ought to aspire to meekness and humility – *except* when called to stand firm against the onslaught of modern moral and religious degeneration.

If More’s own unyielding rhetoric merits charges of repressive prudery, we must also realize the extent to which her rigid refusal to compromise on a universal adherence to “vital religion” translates into an equally heroic refusal to compromise her demands for men to relinquish worldly power. The consistency with which she applies these standards and her incessant calls for pragmatism preclude easy dismissals of her religious realignment of the rhetoric of liberty and equality as mere pacification: for More, nothing produced concrete effects like aggressive Evangelicalism. While we may question the actual long-term effects of the larger Evangelical movement in England, the intent, potential, and force of her rhetoric cannot be denied.

Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great and *An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World* were largely well received, especially among More's Evangelical friends. Anne Stott reports that Queen Charlotte was one of the earliest readers of *Thoughts*, and that, upon reading it, she declared that she would no longer send for a hairdresser on Sunday. Unfortunately, the well-meaning monarch completely missed the deeper point of More's message, for "she did not mean she would not have her hair dressed on a Sunday, but she would not compel a poor tradesmen to violate the Sabbath, but rather employ her own household" (qtd. in Stott 98). This anecdote suggests the extent to which More's role as national moralist was well established with the publication of these tracts; they also secured her reputation as a puritan crusader. Today, they are usually treated as unexciting, stock Evangelicalism – they do not seem to offend as much as the *Cheap Repository Tracts*, and in spite of their overt political content, they are not thought to address those political issues of interest to feminist scholars. Nonetheless, these two shorter tracts have fared better than the religious essays More produced in her later years, which have been denounced as unreadable, or as Demers notes, as the "pathetic rambling effusions of an old 'saint'" (Demers 119). Undoubtedly, *Practical Piety* (1811), *Christian Morals* (1812), *An Essay on the Character and Practical Writings* *of Saint Paul* (1815), and *The Spirit of Prayer* (1825) are long, dense, and often repetitive, but they also provide some of the strongest expressions of More's religious principles and social vision. The continuity between *Thoughts, Estimate*, *Practical Piety* and *Christian Morals* suggests that the harsher criticism reserved for the latter two is rather arbitrary and not based on a careful reading of the texts. In fact, the later essays constitute a rich elaboration of themes treated throughout More's life's work: accordingly, they should be seen as a culmination rather than a deterioration into senility.

In *Practical Piety*, More continues her attack on the errors of thoughtless, nominal Christians and her defense of Biblical faith against the onslaught of rational skepticism. She again emphasizes the distinction between appearance and reality; as in *Thoughts* and *Estimate*, this dichotomy serves as one of the central tropes around which her various arguments revolve. And again, her main target is the spiritual torpor of the middle- and upper-classes. Decrying the inconsistency of those who profess Christianity but live worldly lives, and the general religious diffidence of the age, she resumes her call for practical, vital faith: "We cannot be said to be real Christians, till religion become our animating motive, our predominating principle and pursuit" (423). In true Evangelical spirit, she stresses repeatedly that "Genuine religion demands not merely an external profession of our allegiance to God, but an inward devotedness of ourselves to his service" (418). Form, ritual, even doctrine count for little in comparison with a simple but fervent piety expressed in good works and, above all, a Christian temper – humility, charity, patience, obedience – those observable traits which evince an inner state of being in harmony with God's will.

At other points, however, it becomes clear that More is not so much establishing a dichotomy between appearance and reality, but, once again, arguing for such a complete consistency between inner state and external acts that the distinction itself effectively breaks down. Her commitment to the practical extension of faith means that she stops short of advocating a denial of the world or a kind of mind/body split. Indeed, as she reminds us incessantly, action in the world and in the interest of reforming the world is the highest goal of faith. Thus, in *Practical Piety*, it is not worldliness *per se* that raises More's ire but "periodical religion" (430). That is, she does not seek to elevate the spiritual at the expense of the material, but to "[weave] our devotions and our actions into one uniform tissue by doing all in one spirit and to one end" (430).

This familiar argument here gains added force from a series of organic images and metaphors associated with gardening and cultivation. More herself was an avid gardener, and wrote often of her passion in letters to friends, delighting in the "pleasant wild" of her cottage at Cowslip Green and, later, at Barley Wood (Roberts vol.1; 348). She once wrote to Horace Walpole that she spent "almost my whole time in my little garden [...] From 'morn to noon, from noon to dewy eve,' I am employed in raising dejected pinks and reforming disorderly honeysuckles" (Roberts vol.1; 379). This imagery suits well her sense of the interconnectedness of public and private life, and her vision of social reform. In accord with the notion that social change results only from inner personal conversion, her use of organic language conveys the idea that reform must emerge from the ground up, as it were, and cannot be imposed in the form of abstract or merely philosophical ideals. Such imagery also reflects the maternal or nurturing aspects of her efforts – rhetorical and actual – to subsume public business within a feminized domestic ideology.

Throughout *Practical Piety*, More envisions proper religion in terms of a healthy, vigorous flowering of correct principles which have been implanted in the "congenial soil" of a receptive mind (429). Fashionable, lukewarm, or periodical religion, on the other hand, constrained as it is by false ideals of honour and decorum, "is dwarfish and stunted, it makes no shoots. Though it gives some signs of life, it does not grow" (427). And yet More holds out hope that "even in this weak and barren soil some germs will shoot, some blossoms will open, of that celestial plant, which, watered by the dews of heaven and ripened by the Sun of righteousness, will, in a more genial clime, expand into the fulness of perfection" (443). In both *Thoughts* and *Estimate*, she writes of correcting human errors by striking at their root. Here, she emphasizes the positive extension of the metaphor, arguing that implanted, cultivated religion, "because its root is deep," informs all activities and shapes every conversation without feeling forced, and influences the tenor of public business without interfering with the necessities of everyday life (428).

Practical Piety's organic language also casts into sharp relief More's preferred mode of social change: gradual, intrinsic development rather than sudden or violent coercion or revolution. This preference, of course, constitutes the cornerstone of generic conservatism – improving upon but preserving the institutions and traditions of the past – and garners More the designation of reformer rather revolutionary. It is therefore easy to categorize her attitude towards social change as "conservative" and rest content that this categorization offers some kind of explication; on the contrary, it tells us very little about the particulars of her views, and how they actually play out in her writing. In fact, More's organic vision seems to have just as much or more to do with her pedagogical orientation than it does with her mistrust of radical change. Her first vocation was teaching, and as her classroom grew to include the entire nation, she never lost the educative bent of her mind. Moreover, her extensive training and hands-on experience in the field and her success in wresting progress from the most recalcitrant of students testify to her considerable talent. She knew firsthand the futility of trying to introduce unfamiliar ideas to an unready mind, and it is More as schoolteacher, I would argue, rather than More as Burkean conservative, that comes through most clearly in her contention that "the principle and the nature flourish most in those haunts which are their congenial soil" (429).

Anne Stott's discussion of her efforts in the Mendip Sunday schools provides an apt illustration of More's practice of cultivating a congenial soil instead of enforcing abstract rule. In contrast to Foucauldian readings of More's efforts to "master and control the explosive and disruptive tendencies of the lower-class body," Stott argues that the reality of the situation was that "the Mendip people had ideas of their own, and, because they did not fear her, because she was not a clergyman, a magistrate, or a landlord, they were quick to give her their opinions and, if necessary, to obstruct her plans" (106). In large part because of her sex, therefore, More had no objective authority in the eyes of her prospective pupils; like a gardener, she had to learn to work with the natural qualities and contours of the landscape, appealing to the needs and expectations of the people rather than alienating an already suspicious population by imposing foreign concepts or attempting to initiate practices that threatened established ways. Her first battles were with the powerful farmers who held the local wage labourers in their employ. Stott records More's comments to Wilberforce about a particular "chief Despot" of one the Mendip villages: "He begg'd I wou'd not think of bringing any religion into the Country;

it was the worst thing in the world for the poor, for it made them lazy and useless" (108). As modest and even limited as her curriculum appears today, it was radical enough for those who stood to lose from a literate workforce. But More's struggles were not only with the local authorities: once she actually had a school up and running, if the children or their parents did not care for the type of education being offered, they simply stopped coming. As Stott emphasizes, attempts at coercion or control would have failed miserably in this potentially hostile or indifferent environment.

Such macro-level concerns were mirrored in More's efforts to ensure that effective teaching methods were carried out in the classrooms. Her personal letters are replete with complaints about the difficulty of finding good teachers and comments regarding her own pedagogical tactics – for example, she shunned the use of corporal punishment because, in her words, "I have found that kindness produces a better end by better means" (qtd. in Stott 124). Stott points out that More's experience led to "some very modern-sounding views about the best method of instruction," including encouraging the children's active participation and discussion rather than rote learning (124). In More's reasoned perspective, principles and beliefs dictated conduct and method. If one's method worked and one's conduct garnered favourable results, then one's beliefs and principle were most likely true. Hence her leading criticism of revolutionary philosophy, that it would not *work*, because it was based on a faulty understanding of human nature. In *Practical Piety*, it is her skilled schoolteacher's perspective on human nature that leads her to contend that the most effective way to strengthen the moral fabric of the nation – not only in prudish Evangelical terms, but also in the interest of true benevolence – is to implant and gently tend rather than revolutionize. Similarly, a pedagogical rather than a strictly political or repressive sensibility is at work in her incessant demands for diligence at rooting out bad habits: her insistence that real moral improvement is the fruit of "a long and often painful course" testifies to a maternal awareness of the patience and the small, daily labours necessary to bring a child – or a nation – up in the way she should go (440).

To be sure, a classroom-oriented pedagogy, nurturing and maternal though it may be, is hardly democratic. A constructive learning environment, like a healthy and thriving garden, is characterized by harmony, with each fulfilling his or her part and with the authority and leadership of the teacher intact. Moreover, progress must be regulated and gradual: a seed will not germinate in rocky soil, and a child cannot read a story before she learns the alphabet. The benevolent guidance of one who "knows better" is necessary for such progress. This configuration clearly lends itself to a conservative political agenda – or, to use the favourite accusation of More detractors, paternalism – and encourages varying degrees of subordination for the sake of individual edification rather than unrestrained self-determination. But just as a good teacher exercises authority in sincerity for the best interests of her students, so would it be disingenuous to interpret More's pedagogy categorically in terms of a political power grab.

This pedagogy, which can be conservative in its political implications, but which transcends politics in many ways, and which asserts women's maternal authority while construing the struggling Christian as an "infant," also leads critics to pronounce on More's contradictions and hypocrisy. She champions Christianity over and against the ancient pagan religions because it instates the "bond of charity," a "reversionary equality between the wise and the ignorant, the master and the slave, the Greek and the barbarian" and, potentially, "one indissoluble bond of universal brotherhood" (448). On the same page, she writes,

> [Christianity] encircles the whole sphere of duty with broad and golden zone of coalescing charity, stamped with the inscription 'a new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another.' Christianity instead of destroying the distinctions of rank, or breaking in on the regulations of society, by this universal precept, furnishes new fences to its order, additional security to its repose, and fresh strength to its subordinations. (*Practical Piety* 449)

Thinking in terms of political power alone, it is incoherent to assert that the principles of "universal brotherhood" and Christian love strengthen rather than eradicate the "fences" that separate various social strata. But in More's well-ordered classroom, such distinctions operate with a different kind of logic: her version of the proverbial Mother Hen may include a fair dose of bossiness, but it cannot be equated, in a simple one-to-one correspondence, with the political conservatism of her male contemporaries. She certainly did not support the ideal of a classless society, but neither did she countenance the dehumanizing effects of the social hierarchy on the poor. She could not advocate upward social mobility without contradicting her staunch criticisms of fashionable worldliness but she also devoted herself to instilling humility and self-denial in the upper classes. She encouraged an obedient and submissive temper, but in the most powerful king as well as in the lowliest labourer.

Perhaps the mistake is to assume that a truly feminized or maternalist ideology is necessarily radically egalitarian in every possible way, or that for a woman's position to count as "feminist" it must espouse democratic politics. In More's case, while her antipathy to enlightened liberalism is unambiguous, she does not fit comfortably with conservatism either. Her ethics of maternal pedagogy, therefore, do not constitute a contradiction so much as refusal to conform to our own political categories. But if revolutionary politics are no better at ensuring women's empowerment than conservative politics, then More's rejection of worldly conceptions of power altogether is, at least potentially, more empowering than either. And that was precisely her point: she wanted to change the very terms in which politics operated, not to substitute one political ideology with another. Indeed, her instatement of maternal pedagogy rather than stock conservatism effectively feminizes traditional political categories – in this way, we may consider her reform agenda not *apolitical* but *supra-political*.

Christian Morals, published in 1813, was More's final attempt to encourage religious and moral excellence in general society. Her two subsequent major works took a slightly different tack. Her essay on St. Paul was theological and exegetical rather than polemical in nature, while *The Spirit of Prayer*, as the title suggests, was more devotional and focused on the specific topic of prayer rather than general social reform. *Christian Morals* deviates little in substance from More's earlier efforts, and picks up on many of the central themes developed in *Practical Piety*. In particular, she continues to refine her own particular brand of maternalism, with its defiant mix of conservatism and subversion. While in *Practical Piety*, organic imagery provided the operative metaphors, in *Christian Morals* More develops similar ideas by appealing to the parable of the talents from Matthew 25. Just as her conception of social change and moral education as a gradual, organic process tended by a benevolent maternal gardener allowed her to circumvent the usual conservative/radical binary, so here does her application of the parable to the activities of daily life provide rhetorical latitude for justifying the material implications of Christian piety. While maintaining her emphasis on the importance of a humble and submissive spirit, More demonstrates how a spiritual grounding enables concrete – that is, political and economic – agency in the world, regardless of sex.

In order to convey the full import of More's treatment of the parable, it is useful to compare it with Mary Wollstonecraft's reference to the same story in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Kathryn Sutherland argues that neither More nor Wollstonecraft "can imagine women as occupying any other than the nurturing role: this is women's work" (47). She further points out that, while More embraces this definition of femininity and turns it to women's advantage, Wollstonecraft protests vigorously against the limitations it sets on women's dignity and opportunities. Ironically, according to Sutherland, it is Wollstonecraft's vision that is ultimately more limiting and fatalistic than More's. Wollstonecraft's ideal woman is very much like More's – a loving mother and skilled household manager. But in contrast to More's feminized Evangelical rhetoric, the inherently "misogynist" assumptions of Wollstonecraft's "partially appropriated rationalism" lead her to despair of concrete change and resign her to feminine moral and spiritual superiority alone without material benefit (Sutherland 50):

> I think I see her [the ideal woman], surrounded by her children, reaping the reward of her care. The intelligent eye meets hers, whilst health and innocence smile on their chubby cheeks, and as they grow up the cares of life are lessened by their grateful attention. She lives [...] to see her children attain a strength of character sufficient to enable them to endure adversity without forgetting their mother's example.
>
> The task of life thus fulfilled, she calmly waits for the sleep of death, and rising from the grave, may say – 'Behold, Thou gavest me a talent, and here are five talents.' (Wollstonecraft 164-5)

In Sutherland's reading, it is "depressing and significant" that even in Wollstonecraft's hypothetical musings, she "aspires no higher than a compromised and severe accommodation to the socio-economic strictures of her present" (49). For Wollstonecraft, the hard-earned yield on female talents can only be noble self-sacrifice. For all More's insistence on humility and submission, her equally strong emphasis on action, and her steely, sometimes even forced, optimism that God will help those who help themselves preclude such a sad celebration of female martyrdom. The energetic and productive widow Mrs. Jones of More's *Cheap Repository Tracts*, for example, constitutes a more positive and empowering incarnation of the parable of the talents. For Mrs. Jones, an Evangelical commitment to philanthropy, often in the form of overt community leadership, means that "the exemplar [of the talents] has lost none its original economic force and, consequently, none of its feminist potential" (Sutherland 50).

Sutherland's comparison of Wollstonecraft's maternal martyr with More's maternal champion constitutes a reinterpretation of the joint effect of Evangelicalism and capitalism on women's social role. As she suggests, it is precisely the religious justification for capitalist productivity that sanctions Mrs. Jones' involvement with village politics and the struggling rural economy. Although Sutherland makes no reference to *Christian Morals* in her discussion, it is here that More explicitly and thoroughly fleshes out the role that the parable injunction plays in her Evangelical agenda. Once again, her central concern is to define public agency along religious, and therefore non-gendered, lines, and to effect a blurring of the private/public distinction in order to elevate the importance of what she considers to be a superior domestic sensibility.

More begins her discussion in *Christian Morals* with a comment on the instructive medium of parable in general, recalling some of her pedagogical insights in

Practical Piety and, perhaps, an autobiographical reflection on her work in the Sunday schools. While "mankind" in general is "delighted with allegory and metaphor," she writes, it is particularly the "illiterate and uninformed" who benefit from imaginative instruction that appeals to the senses (134). Evoking her earlier emphasis on the importance of organic holism in teaching, More notes that "by laying hold of the imagination, parable insinuates itself into the affections, and, by the intercommunication of the faculties, the understanding is made to apprehend the truth which was proposed to the fancy" (135). Just as the content of education must appeal to already familiar concepts and expectations, so must the mode of instruction conform to the mind's natural processes of apprehension. In both cases, any attempt to force the unfamiliar would only yield negative results. As always, More frames her entire discussion – a discussion which ranges from daily minutiae to grand concerns such as the pursuit of justice to Judgment Day itself – in pedagogical terms, casting herself as a wise and benevolent teacher.

The central moral she draws from the parable is an obvious one, but crucial for a justification of women's involvement with economic or material affairs: "we have nothing that is properly our own, nothing that is underived from God. Every talent is a deposit placed in our hands, not for our exclusive benefit, but for the good of others" (137). By simultaneously undercutting the ultimate reality of earthly possessions and investing the conduct of earthly business with spiritual significance, this basic scriptural wisdom has the potential to wrest from men their exclusive hold on material reality. In can also be used to shield ambitious women from accusations of over-stepping God-given bounds. By this logic, More's own profitable industry cannot be demeaned as unfeminine, for it is not she who "possesses" either her skills or the profits they yield –

she is simply fulfilling the duty set for her by God. This appeal to the mysterious ways of Providence not only allows for the possibility of women implementing their unique talents in the world, but also creates an imperative to do so that cannot be easily circumscribed by the authority of custom or convention. As we will see in *Strictures*, in More's estimation, the majority of women do not possess talents beyond the range of conventional feminine skills, but she also argues that this is largely a function of education; moreover, those few who do exhibit, for example, "real genius," have a duty to answer their special calling (*Strictures* 325). Indeed, to deny this calling carries dire consequences:

> What will be the eternal anathema pronounced on those who possessed aggregately talents, with every one of which, singly enjoyed, they might have rendered the world about them better and happier? To reflect by whom they were bestowed, to what end designed, how they have been used, and what a reckoning awaits them, form a combination of reflections too awful to be dwelt upon. (*Christian Morals* 138)

On the other hand, just as More's maternalist pedagogy in *Practical Piety* leads her to affirm the "fences" that maintain the social order, here the notion that talents are divinely ordained encourages an acceptance of social inequality. It also leads More to criticize women who aspire to those activities that lay beyond their allotted skills – although she does allow a significant amount of latitude in defining what that limited purview may entail. The point, in More's Biblical economy, is not to wish more for yourself, but to make the most of what you have for God's sake: "These talents are bestowed in various proportions, as to their value, as well as in different degrees, as to the quantity" (138). While More makes no *prescriptive* comment on the importance of keeping the poor in their place, neither does she challenge the fact that some are more gifted than others, whether intellectually or materially.

And yet this implicit elitism does not mitigate the usefulness of the talent metaphor for eighteenth-century feminist apologetics; nor does it render More regressive *vis-à-vis* the tradition of women writers in which she was working. One hundred years earlier, Mary Astell's staunch royalism and High Anglicanism buttressed her defense of women's right to education but also engendered an intolerance of Dissenters and hostility towards Restoration theories of popular sovereignty and lawful resistance. Along with Astell and later eighteenth-century "Mistresses of Orthodoxy" such as Anna Barbauld and Hester Chapone (Leranbaum 1977), More challenges the notion that the "oppressed" in any given social configuration constitute a static and monolithic entity – that women's interests always coincide with the interests of other marginalized groups. In *Strictures*, More in fact moves beyond the argument that the individual's "natural" and obvious gifts be granted social currency and legitimacy, to a trenchant deconstruction of the systemic obstacles in the way of discerning what those gifts might entail. Her critique of masculine culture in *Thoughts* and *Estimate*, her maternalist pedagogy in *Practical Piety*, and her theological justification for political and economic action in *Christian Morals* – as well as the limits placed on what she deemed viable and positive social change – thus form a coherent context for her explicitly feminist vision. Indeed, far from being regressive in comparison with earlier and contemporaneous feminists, the sheer comprehensiveness of More's reform program constitutes a markedly ambitious departure from all historical precedents.

Chapter Three

Amazons and Actresses: Performance versus Agency in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*

Fanny Price, the quiet heroine of one of Jane Austen's least popular novels, *Mansfield Park* (1814), has been much maligned by readers and critics for her almost pathological timidity and submissiveness. Contemporary readers often prefer the novel's lively, opinionated, and sexy anti-heroine Mary Crawford precisely because she transgresses early nineteenth-century prescriptions for pale and fluttering femininity – prescriptions Fanny seems resigned to fulfill in her self-effacing acquiescence to male authority and silent suffering in the face of tremendous adversity. Fanny combines submissiveness with what cynical readers consider typical Austenian prudery: the extra-marital affair between Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram is so appalling she can barely comprehend the depravity. By Fanny's standards, it would seem their dalliance is more appalling even than the fact that Sir Thomas bankrolls Mansfield Park from the profits of slave labour, and readers have frequently questioned Austen's perplexing silence on such weightier moral issues (Lew 271-73). Fanny's dismal failure to inspire and empower Austen's female readers in particular prompted Patricia Rozema to remake her in the image of late twentieth-century feminism: in Rozema's 1999 film version, the pale and fluttering wallflower is transformed into a spunky tomboy and ambitious, aspiring author.

We should reconsider whether Fanny requires such anachronistic revision in order to provide edification for contemporary readers; arguably, efforts to render Austen's fictional character assertive and provocative are as misguided as those which attempt to remake Hannah More in the image of Mary Wollstonecraft. For, at key moments in the novel, Fanny's timid acquiescence gives way to reveal steely moral courage. Her refusal to enter a materially and socially beneficial marriage contract because she believes her suitor to be unprincipled garners a vitriolic attack from her feared uncle and guardian:

> I had thought you peculiarly free from wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit, which so prevails in modern days, even in young women, and which in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offense. But you have now shewn me that you can be wilful and perverse, that you can and will decide for yourself, without any consideration or deference for those who have surely some right to guide you [...] (Austen 256)

This characterization seems ridiculously disproportionate to her offense, and may leave many readers wondering if he is talking to the same Fanny whose pliability has tested our patience for the previous two hundred pages. But Sir Thomas detects more real defiance in Fanny's quiet moral fortitude than in the superficial rebellions of his more assertive daughters. And, despite our biases against Fanny, he is right to feel so threatened. In this instance and throughout the novel, Fanny's shy modesty indeed shows itself to be rooted in a profound and principled "independence of spirit." While her more vocal cousins and the vivacious Mary Crawford enjoy greater social visibility in their various roles as sexual object, coquettish husband-hunter, bored wife, or romantic heroine, Fanny's moral strength is derived in part from her almost complete social *invisibility*: she refuses to play a role that does violence to her personal integrity. Hence her powerful refusal to participate in the illicit theatre production. While the others revel in the opportunity to perform, as a means to further their various sexual exploits or to indulge their vanity, Fanny's insistence that "No, indeed, I cannot act" represents the most fundamental truth of her character (119).

Hannah More never read the novels of her contemporary Jane Austen, and Austen expressed ambivalence towards More's work, and disdain for Evangelicals in general, in her letters to family and friends. Responding to her sister Cassandra's glowing review of *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, Austen wrote rather playfully, "I do not like the Evangelicals.—Of course I shall be delighted when I read [*Coelebs*], like other people, but till I do, I dislike it" (*Letters* 170). This ambivalence is intriguing, for had More read *Mansfield Park*, she would have found a brilliant and nuanced portrayal of her own ideals and aims for women's intellectual and moral education.[5] The central theme of More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, published fifteen years before Austen's novel, is the importance of being true to oneself rather than merely performing in the world, of eschewing superficial social roles for individual authenticity and integrity. More's central complaint regarding the current state of women's education and their subsequent diminished status in society is that "the morning is all rehearsal, and the evening is all performance" (330). Fanny's avowal that she will not act constitutes a decisive answer to More's call for women to assert themselves, not as players in the male drama of convention and custom, but as moral and rational agents willing to deviate from the social script when their beliefs and principles demand.

This emphasis on inner character over outward appearance in the world closely links *Strictures* with the works studied in the previous chapter. While the social tracts that precede it and the religious tracts written subsequently are directed at a general and mixed audience, here More aims her critiques and reforms specifically at women. The continuity of More's concerns is therefore striking: her fundamental vision of vital, Evangelical Christianity and her critique of worldly values changes little, if at all, from her earliest efforts in *Thoughts* to her final publications, regardless of audience. And yet, women's actual position in society demands not only simple advice on how to live out a consistent piety. Insofar as they are ill-educated and denied the opportunities afforded men for the cultivation of rational thought and, consequently, a deeply held and well-considered faith, women must first be given tools of understanding and reflection. They must, if they are to reflect the image of God, be treated as subjects rather than objects, and their conduct must warrant such respect. In *Thoughts*, *Estimate*, *Remarks*, *Practical Piety*, and *Christian Morals*, More implies that the vast majority of men know in theory how they are to live and behave, enjoy all the advantages of education and the means to act in the world, but most, due to habit, laziness, selfishness, or weakness, do not even aspire to the ideals. Women, on the other hand, More suggests in *Strictures*, have the advantages of a natural inclination for piety and fewer temptations due to their more limited experience of the world, but such advantages come at the cost of the development of their minds. And since, for More, faith is as much a matter of reasoned reflection and understanding as it is a matter of feeling, women's disadvantages in the world result in a dangerous neglect of their souls and spiritual well-being. When addressing a general audience, More registers continual amazement that mankind, especially in England, makes so little of the intellectual, moral, and spiritual talents granted him by God; in *Strictures*, she registers a similar amazement that some women have been able to make *so much* of their meagre educations and their severely limited means. This does not mean that More is less critical in *Strictures* than in other works; indeed, the force of her animadversions seems only to increase in proportion to the importance of the problem – and the role of women for the good of all society is of the utmost importance for More. But it does mean that she directs these criticisms less towards natural human proclivities and the daily impieties which receive so much attention in her other works, and more towards larger, systemic obstacles to the development of a Christian, female subjectivity that will enable women to fulfill their God-given duties.

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[5] For a comparison of Hannah More and Jane Austen, see Jane Nardin, "Jane Austen, Hannah More, and the Novel of Education."

More's earlier effort in articulating women's roles and duties was entitled *Essays on Various Subjects Principally Designed for Young Ladies* (1777). Although it demonstrates her characteristic assertiveness and eloquence, *Essays* was decidedly less successful than *Strictures*. She does sketch some of the central concepts later developed in *Strictures* and with a similar rhetorical punch, demanding with stirring indignation, "How much then is it to be regretted, that the British ladies should ever sit down contented to polish, when they are able to reform, to entertain, when they might instruct, and to dazzle for an hour, when they are candidates for eternity [?]" (19). But her discussion of the differences between the sexes is here ill-considered and extremist, and she is too uncritical of the "bounds" prescribed for women by "nature, propriety, and custom" (3). As an early indication of her skill and ferocity as a rhetorician, *Essays* is instructive, but as an expression of her vision for reform, it is disappointing. More herself later denounced this immature work, and she never allowed it to be reprinted. When a pirated version began circulating in 1810, she insisted on printing a notice through her publishers in the Bath and Bristol papers, informing her audience that the edition is "not only unauthorized but against her consent" (qtd. in Demers 79). Further, having "suppressed those *Essays* as a very juvenile work," the publishers direct more discerning readers to her improved treatment of the same subjects in *Strictures* (qtd. in Demers 79). Although she never officially recanted any of the statements made in *Essays*, it is clear that she intended *Strictures* as a corrective to her earlier misconceptions, and as the definitive statement of her own beliefs and principles.

In *Strictures*, her concern with articulating a female subjectivity leads her to stress inward development instead of an expansion of women's roles in the world; to this extent, *Essays* does contain the germ of her later, more sophisticated position. It is on this point that More demonstrates her commitment to consistency most clearly, and it is on this point that she has been so frequently and insistently misunderstood as instating a double standard or reflecting a contradiction. As we have seen, many critics equate her failure to argue explicitly for women's equal opportunity in the public sphere with a failure to articulate any kind of viable feminist vision whatsoever. But, as we have also seen, she devotes all of her extended polemical essays, both before and after *Strictures*, to the project of urging her readers to concern themselves less with the things of the world and more with reforming the world, to shun worldly honour and glory, which are fleeting and empty, and to cultivate those often inconspicuous virtues that have an eternal impor[illegible]. In *Strictures*, she counsels women to do the same. Indeed, it would be positively incoherent to spend essay after essay decrying the values of the social stage, criticizing men for failing to aspire to Christian virtue, and then, to encourage women to emulate precisely those values that she opposes. The crucial difference is that, while for men, More uses the ideals of practical piety to limit or problematize their hold on worldly power, for women such religiosity becomes the foundation of their agency and even authority. Far from instating a double standard, More's veritable obsession with consistency – in matters spiritual *and* rhetorical – ensures a universal standard for both sexes that works decidedly in the favour of women.

More's insistence on the centrality of inner qualities reflects a desire to liberate women from the restrictions of stereotypical feminine roles – and ultimately, from the imperative of inauthentic social performance altogether. Her program is therefore, potentially, more radical than one that would seek simply to multiply women's options on a relatively superficial level. Just as her maternal pedagogy in *Practical Piety* and *Christian Morals* bypasses the radical/conservative dichotomy in an attempt to change the very terms in which politics operates, so here does her emphasis on individual authenticity suggest a new definition of female empowerment – a definition that subsumes political considerations but nonetheless carries real political weight.

More, of course, was far from alone in her recognition of the importance of articulating a female subjectivity that runs deeper than mere social role or even institutional opportunity. In addition to the earlier efforts of Chudleigh and Astell, Austen's novels also expose the superficial construction of the social fabric and often present heroines, such as Fanny Price, whose strong moral courage actually transcends the dictates of role. Mary Wollstonecraft, like More, affirms motherhood as a woman's highest calling, and similarly rails against false ideals of femininity. In *A Vindication*, she describes how "mistaken notions of female excellence" render women incapable of moral agency, and inculcate them instead with the tools of covert manipulation: "this artificial weakness produces a tendency to tyrannize, and gives birth to cunning, the natural opponent of strength, which leads them to play off those contemptible infantine airs that undermine esteem even whilst they excite desire" (113). In all of these powerful feminist critiques, the exercise of female power through false and devious means is recognized as the only available recourse for women, but it is also categorically rejected as inauthentic, and ultimately, as a further degradation rather than true empowerment.

Of course, a common objection to this emphasis on inner depth and moral integrity is that the cultivation of these subjective qualities does not necessarily translate into objective gains for women – that a kind of spiritual empowerment is a paltry, even a chimerical, substitute for political empowerment. But in establishing a complex subject position for women, even along specifically Christian lines, More was not pacifying women's claims for political advancement; rather, she was laying the conceptual foundation which makes such advancement possible. And neither was she mouthing stock Evangelical cant. Indeed, the concern with authentic subjectivity places More, and her tradition of fellow women writers, in impressive philosophical company. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth- centuries witnessed the development of various forms of Christian and atheist existentialist philosophies similarly concerned with subjectivity and the tension between personal authenticity and social role. Although it may appear anachronistic to draw parallels between the work of eighteenth-century women and existentialism, the similarities are striking nonetheless, and a comparison between the two is helpful to elucidate the philosophical sophistication of More's argument. Expressing a set of similar ideas, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) distinguished between the authentic and inauthentic, Martin Buber (1875-1965) wrote about the duality of *being* versus *seeming*, and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) used the term "bad faith" to describe the human tendency to shirk moral responsibility.[6] To use Buber's terms, authentic personhood is associated with *being*, while acting in accordance with other's expectations or fabricating personae as a means of escaping from responsibilities entailed by authenticity constitutes *seeming*. A certain degree of *seeming* is unavoidable, not only for self-preservation but also for common courtesy – to avoid hurting other people one cannot always be completely honest and unflinchingly authentic. But there is the danger, on the other side, of losing one's self entirely in one's role, becoming a one-dimensional caricature rather than a multi-dimensional human being. The individual, according to existentialism, is free at every juncture to make a rational and moral choice; to conflate self with social role, even if that role is heroic or admirable, is to abdicate moral responsibility and to live in bad faith. Ideally, one can achieve a balance between authenticity and social roles, attempting to make one's roles the objective counterpart of one's being to the greatest degree possible. But in reality, one invariably encounters a degree of tension between genuine selfhood and the demands of society.

Although she did not share the same terminology, More's rejection of a thoughtless conformity to custom, and her complicated reflections on the ways in which one could balance moral integrity without alienating her social peers keenly anticipate existentialist concerns. More's ridiculing of visible social roles for women – "female politicians"; "female warriors"; "the bold and independent beauty, the intrepid female, the hoyden, the huntress, and the archer" (*Strictures* 313; 324) can thus be read, not as retrograde antifeminism, but as a rejection of the mere appearance of empowerment on the basis of empty values and superficial social esteem. For the existentialists, the extent to which one *becomes* his or her social role is the extent to which one loses his or her authentic self. There is an inverse relation between the visibility of one's social role and the visibility of one's personal authenticity. To illustrate, twentieth-century existentialist Maurice Friedman identifies social categories such as "black man" or simply "woman" – social labels that symbolize certain stereotyped roles and elide the distinct individuals behind the labels (58-59). Likewise, to conform wholeheartedly to an identifiable group, whether it be political, religious, or otherwise ideological, is to exchange individual uniqueness for a group identity: "If the black man is invisible as man and person through his very visibility as black, woman is invisible as person and human being through her visibility as woman"(59). Friedman, writing in the early 1980s, observes that while women are in many ways forced to be "devious and indirect" because forthrightness and assertiveness are deemed "unfeminine," complicity with such stereotypes further erases the authentic being of individual women. Consequently,

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[6] For a more complete presentation of the existentialist theories of Heidegger, Buber, and Sartre, see Maurice Friedman, *The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader*. For an extensive discussion of the problem of modern subjectivity and authenticity, see Friedman, *To Deny Our Nothingness: Contemporary Images of Man*.

> Man is willing to accept woman as an equal, as a man in skirts, as an angel, a devil, a baby-face, a machine, an instrument, a bosom, a womb, a pair of legs, a servant, an encyclopedia, an ideal or an obscenity; the only thing he won't accept her as is as a human being, a real human being of the female sex. (Friedman 59)

In light of More's own rejection of the Enlightenment language of rights, it is striking that he includes the designation "equal" as one of the dehumanizing labels applied to women; in this context, it is easy to see how even the ideal of equality could be used to define women solely in terms of their relation to men, rather than in their own terms. The concept of authenticity – indeed, the very concept of selfhood – involves a recognition of the individuality of particular women, and allows the individual a degree of latitude in defining her own self, apart from the group identity of woman. By undermining the legitimacy, even the ultimate reality, of "the world" – that is, of the social and public spheres – More sets up a context in which women can only be accepted as "real" human beings, not for what they can or cannot do, or as an undifferentiated oppressed group vying for political power, but for who they are intrinsically. In this way, the quest for authenticity not only carries real political implications, but precedes political considerations and constitutes the conceptual ground on which all politics and all moral actions rest. For this reason, we can consider it, along with More's maternal pedagogy, an essentially supra-political endeavour. Fanny Price may *appear* dull and uninspiring to many readers, but when visibility or vivacity are functions of role-playing, they become illusory qualities. Because she does not lose herself in her social role, she is less attractive on the level of *seeming* and by the standards of a patriarchal society, but she has the moral depth and true *being* that the other characters in the novel lack. More's refrain throughout *Strictures* is a similar warning about the allure of chimerical freedom that depends for its legitimacy on the ways of the world. Rather than seeking greater participation in a patriarchal system, women ought to find ways of transcending the system altogether on religious grounds. To this end, to use a spatial metaphor, More stresses a vertical rather than a horizontal expansion of womanhood. While this emphasis certainly does a disservice to the importance of increasing women's options for employment, for example, it represents a crucial step forward in laying a conceptual foundation for those options. Without a deepened subjective dimension, More implies, women are freed from one kind of oppression only to be chained to another.

Strictures is replete with such spatial imagery – distinguishing appearance from reality, surface and depth, performance and agency. In order to remedy the daily routine of rehearsal and performance, More argues that women must be taught "that this world is not a stage for the display of superficial or even of shining talent, but for the strict and sober exercise of fortitude, temperance, meekness, faith, diligence, and self-denial" (341). What may appear as an exhortation to traditional feminine modesty is in fact a powerful statement on the importance of moral depth, personal authenticity, and in turn, concrete female empowerment. Women who, like Fanny Price, refuse to act for specifically moral reasons, appealing to their consciences and a higher religious ground, will similarly refuse to act in accordance with patriarchal fictions that do violence to the principles of human dignity and responsibility before God. Any attempt to appropriate women's meekness or self-denial for patriarchal ends will inevitably dissolve in the face of this overriding moral and religious commitment.

The concrete effects of inculcating women with the principles of integrity and authenticity are never far from More's mind. She is acutely aware of the need to challenge rampant objectification of women when it comes to pressing social realities. Her criticisms of popular courtship practices, for example, while they do appeal to men's own interests, are also scathing in their indictment of the "illusions of fashion" that are so demeaning to women (389). Echoing centuries of feminist agitation for companionate marriage between equals, More argues that men ought to view women as potential partners rather than as empty but ornamental vessels. As it is, More contends, fashionable social rites encourage an ethos of superficiality in which women are valued as physical objects only. Her eloquence on the issue bites with subtle sarcasm and irrefutable logic:

> If, indeed, women were mere outside, form and face only, and if mind made up no part of her composition, it would follow that a ball-room was quite as appropriate a place for choosing a wife, as an exhibition room for choosing a picture. But, inasmuch as women are not mere portraits, their value not being determinable by a glance of the eye, it follows that a different mode of appreciating their value, and a different place for viewing them antecedent to their being individually selected, is desirable. The two cases differ also in this, that if a man select a picture for himself from among all its exhibited competitors, and bring it to his own house, the picture being passive, he is able to *fix* it there: while the wife, picked up at a public place, and accustomed to incessant display, will not, it is probable, when brought home, stick so quietly to the spot where he fixes her, but will escape to the exhibition-room again, and continue to be displayed at every subsequent exhibition. (389)[7]

Women are not, she argues, static and passive objects to be fixed and displayed like pieces of art. Moreover, if they are taught that their value lies in their physical appearance, and only insofar as they are appreciated as objects in the eyes of their beholders, then that is precisely how they will continue to see themselves. On the other hand, a woman who has been instilled with a strong sense of self will seek validation in her own inner resources and qualities: her self-sufficiency will defy anyone who attempts to "fix" her in place, but so will it eschew degrading exhibition. The learning and acquirements of such women, too, will not stand out "like the appliquée of the embroiderer," for such qualities can only be intended for the use or pleasure of others (372). Instead, an education that has "been interwoven with the growth of the piece, so as to have become a part of the stuff" will serve best the interests of her who possesses it (372).

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[7] Kathryn Kirkpatrick reads this passage as *advocating* the "fixing" of women in the home as objects of private property: "In advising prospective brides against going too often into public, Hannah More lays bare the essential terms of the marriage contract, or rather, the terms the *good* wife abides by. The good wife behaves like private property; she stays where her husband 'sticks' her" (Kirkpatrick 222). By failing to recognize the fact that More's stated intention is to encourage men to see women as complex subjects rather than objects, and to educate women so that they may demand this subject position, I would argue that Kirkpatrick entirely misreads the text. She also appears to be remarkably unaware of the incisive irony in More's description of women as "portraits": More's point is precisely that women are *not* passive objects and cannot be fixed in one place.

In More's estimation, another, all-too-common social role that serves to elide the authenticity of individual women is that of slave to sensibility. As a caricature of all that is softly and delicately feminine, this role occupies the opposite end of the spectrum from those other objects of More's contempt, the female warrior and the female politician. Although much is made of More's rejection of what could be construed as positive and empowering roles for women, she spends far more time animadverting on the "dangers of an ill-directed Sensibility," undermining the stereotype of the irrational, hyper-emotional female, than she does on the unnaturally aggressive virago (378). Interestingly, she places the onus for encouraging strength of mind and character, not only on educators of women, but on their male counterparts in society: she recognizes acutely that women often behave like foolish children because they are treated like foolish children in every aspect of their lives. Catering to an imagined feminine delicacy, men seldom treat women as equals even in daily conversation:

> Strong truths, whenever such happen to be addressed to them, are either diluted with flattery, or kept back in part, or softened to their taste; or if the ladies express a wish for information on any point, they are put off with a compliment, instead of a reason. They are reminded of their beauty when they are seeking to inform their understanding, and are considered as beings who must be contented to behold everything through false medium, and who are not expected to see and to judge of things are they really exist. (370)

While More conceives of non-traditional and "strong" roles for women as unnatural, she also conceives of traditional feminine fragility as equally unnatural: any role whatsoever, by defining the individual in terms other than as an image-bearer of God, does violence to the self as understood in More's Evangelical anthropology. As she declares early on in *Strictures*, "we are neither to train up Amazons nor Circassians, but [...] Christians, [...] not only rational, but accountable beings" (324). In More's configuration, being "Christian" is synonymous with being rational and accountable; anything else, whether warrior *or* helpless maiden, is a false construction and thus a kind of prison.

When More was writing *Strictures*, the cult of Sensibility, celebrating a feminine, psychosomatic sensitivity of emotion and perception, dominated popular constructions of femininity. In novels especially, women were often depicted as frail creatures under the total sway of "feeling as articulated by the body – by its postures and gestures, its involuntary palpitations and collapses" (Mullan 16). In its most positive manifestations, Sensibility emphasized the empathetic and intuitive capacities of women, but it also limited them to these gentler qualities; at her worst, the woman of Sensibility was reduced to a mindless, hysterical caricature devoid of reason and agency. Consequently, Sensibility as an ideology was a frequent target of women writers who sought to establish women as rational subjects. Jane Austen lampooned Sensibility in many of her novels, most explicitly in the character of Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). In *A Vindication*, Mary Wollstonecraft attempts to persuade women "to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness" (111). And like More, both Austen and Wollstonecraft do not advocate the extreme at the opposite end of the Sensibility spectrum; rather, they stress maturity and magnanimity, dignity and rationality above all the roles used either to idealize or to demonize women.

While More's protestations against weak and irrational femininity run throughout *Strictures*, she also devotes an entire chapter to the subject of Sensibility in particular. She argues that warm affections should not be suppressed entirely, but that they should be balanced with healthy doses of discipline, self-denial, and the exercise of judgment and reason. In accord with Wollstonecraft, More abhors any practice or prejudice that serves to infantilize women; thus she spends pages delineating the causes and harmful effects of indulging in ungoverned and immature emotions. Essentially, More sees Sensibility as symptomatic of a larger cultural system which trains women to be frivolous and then forbids them the means of improvement on the grounds that they are incapable: "in which system emotions are too early and too much excited, and tastes and feelings are considered as too exclusively making up the whole of the female character" (380). Although Sensibility was often held up as proof of women's moral and spiritual superiority, construing them as more naturally in tune with human feelings and human suffering than men, More rejects this dubious ideal on the grounds that it is, like its opposites the hoyden and the huntress, superficial and one-dimensional. She perceives also that it is ultimately designed to shield women from reality in the same way that "strong truths" are "diluted" in mixed company. Such patronizing protection only renders women perpetual children, and More stresses repeatedly the fact that women cannot be faulted for limitations that are so carefully instilled: "The impatience, levity, and fickleness which women have been somewhat too generally accused, are perhaps in no small degree aggravated by the littleness and frivolousness of female pursuits. The sort of education they commonly receive teaches girls to set a great price on small things" (381). True Sensibility, argues More, as opposed to the fluttering affectations of fashion, can be found in Christian compassion, where empathy and concern for others is balanced with sober rationality, and is geared towards active benevolence instead of self-indulgent drawing room histrionics.

When More locates the source of false Sensibility, not in women themselves, but as a function of men's fantasies and poets' imaginations, she puts her finger on the essentially performative nature of this feminine ideology. She demands, "When ladies are complimented with being 'Fine by defect, and delicately weak' is not a standard of feebleness held out to them, to which vanity will gladly resort, and to which softness and indolence can easily act up, or rather *act down* [...]?" (384). She objects to the acting out of patriarchal fictions, whatever they may be, and criticizes all feminine roles as false, whether they are designed to defy tradition in the manner of the female politician, to fulfill social expectations, or to please and captivate adoring men. And while her criticisms are squarely aimed at men, she avoids casting women as helpless victims: indeed, her well-aimed barbs at women who willingly play their parts for personal gain or vanity suggest a sharp appreciation for the reality of female agency – even when it is directed in the service of complicity.

Many of the proscriptions More places on female learning and accomplishments in *Strictures* must be read in light of this overall critique of superficial social performance. In accord with her Evangelical pragmatism, More seeks to educate women, not so that they may *please*, but so that they may be *useful*. She recommends docility for Christian women – as she does gentleness, meekness, and humility for men in *Estimate* – but with a marked difference from traditional configurations. Christianity demands that women cultivate a "gentle demeanour," but authenticity demands that it *not* be cultivated "on the low ground of its being decorous, and feminine, and pleasing, and calculated to attract human favour" (340). Instead, women, like men, should be taught to "cultivate it on the high principle of obedience to Christ" (340). For More, *how* and *to what end* a woman is taught are just as important, if not more so, than *what* she is taught. Indeed, the former actually decide the latter. Her emphasis on the higher ends of learning results in a fierce attack on feminine curricula that render women ornamental objects:

> We admit that a young lady may excel in speaking French and Italian; may repeat a few passages from a volume of extracts; play like a professor, and sing like a syren; have her dressing-room decorated with her own drawings, tables, stands, flower-pots, screens and cabinets; nay, she may dance like Sempronia herself, and yet we shall insist that she may have been very badly educated. (329)

When it comes to literary and artistic aspirations, More is careful to distinguish between dilettantism and what she calls "real genius, which is as valuable as it is rare" (325). She does not argue that women are inherently unable to write well or produce great art; rather, she rails against "the absurdity of that system which is erecting the *whole sex* into artists" (325). Many critics have interpreted such comments as patronizing, but in fact they demonstrate a basic common sense: in truth, most women, and most men, are not literary or artistic geniuses. A system that encourages all women to dabble in the arts regardless of whether they have talent or not only undermines the efforts of women who are truly gifted. It is frank realism that informs More's vision of how to improve the lives of real women – they ought to cultivate their individual talents rather than try to conform to social expectations. Indeed, the notion that every woman should aspire to be an "accomplished lady" only hinders any real accomplishment an individual woman might attain on her own merit. The same applies to female literary aspirations: More discourages fanciful dreams of novel-writing, not so much as a slight against female ability, but because she is at such pains to address those tendencies that serve to fan the flames of male condescension. Speaking perhaps from difficult personal experience, she delivers a sharp reality check to aspiring authoresses, and it is clear that her caution stems from genuine concern rather than spiteful discouragement:

> [...] she will have to encounter the mortifying circumstance of having her sex always taken into account; and her highest exertions will probably be received with the qualified approbation that it is really extraordinary *for a woman*. Men of learning [...] are inclined to consider even the happier performances of the other sex as the spontaneous productions of a fruitful but shallow soil; and to give them the same kind of praise which we bestow on certain sallads, which often draw from us a sort of wondering commendation, not indeed as being worth much in themselves, but because by the lightness of the earth, and a happy knack in the gardener, these indifferent cresses sprung up in a night and therefore we are ready to wonder they are no worse. (365)

Implicit also in her warnings about how men of learning "estimate works in proportion as they appear to be the result of art, study, and institution" is the suggestion that, in order to succeed by the standards of the world, women must apply themselves more rigorously to their studies. She largely accepts the fact that most women do not have the time or means to do so, and she does not, given her Evangelical agenda, believe that such pursuits are of the utmost importance, even for geniuses. But the point remains that she is not making any statement on the essential or inherent inability of women to succeed in these arenas. She recognizes that limited education and material conditions act as hindrances to female literary achievements, and most sensibly, she addresses those very real limitations instead of inciting women, in a falsely triumphant mode, to achieve the impossible by spontaneously throwing off their shackles and expressing themselves in verse.

More's pragmatic realism sets her apart from the tradition of feminist polemics in an important way. One of the most common rhetorical conventions used by women writers from the early Renaissance onwards was to provide a catalogue of famous virtuous and learned women from the Bible and antiquity – a kind of battery of historical evidence to refute misogynist claims that women were inherently corrupt or naturally incapable of intellectual achievement. Mary Astell, for example, in her *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700), catalogues exemplary women of the Old and New Testaments to impressive rhetorical effect. As convincing as this convention could be, however, it also ran the risk of pleading for special cases only, rather than enacting a systemic deconstruction of patriarchal logic. More, on the other hand, concerns herself primarily with that vast majority of women who, while they may not be extraordinarily gifted, are still deserving of respect as multi-dimensional human beings. Thus, she stresses the need to invest "ordinary life" with due seriousness, virtue, and dignity (363). Indeed, in More's Evangelical economy, the diligence of an uneducated farmer's wife warrants as much respect, if not more, than the most brilliant literary achievements of learned men *or* women.

Admittedly, More's common sense approach can result in a less than inspiring acceptance of the institutional and economic realities that curtail viable options for women's work. However, far from constituting an "obsession with outlining and enforcing the distinctions between ranks," as Kathryn Kirkpatrick would have it (213), More is simply stating the obvious when she points out that

> The use of the pencil, the performance of exquisite but unnecessary works, the study of foreign languages and of music, require (with some exceptions which

> should always be made in favour of great natural genius) a degree of leisure which belongs exclusively to affluence. (324).

More importantly, that she did not believe these particular areas of study to be crucial for the development of women's minds and souls is entirely of a piece with her overall program. It is precisely in the interest of consistency that she does not seek to remove the material obstacles to their pursuit, as her pietistic Evangelical program actually privileges the less glorious work of middle-class women and philanthropy over the cultured pastimes of the elite. She does not, however, dismiss out of hand the possibility of women who are willing and able to do so – provided they do not lead to the neglect of more serious and more useful activity. More's ultimate aim is not to bar the less fortunate from the material privileges of the upper classes, but to effect reforms whereby *all* classes engage in similarly serious Christian work. Useful and pious labour, not a desire to delineate social rank, constitutes More's "obsession."

In *Thoughts*, *Estimate*, and *Practical Piety*, More invokes a dichotomy between a worldly and an other-worldly orientation, which has been frequently misunderstood as a reinforcement of a public/private split. In *Strictures*, the same dichotomy, and the same inversion of worldly values, is at work to encourage a serious and introspective temper in women. Rather than attempting to imprison women within a spatially delineated sphere, More states explicitly that she is seeking to root out "vanity, selfishness, and inconsideration" – precisely those tendencies that provide fodder for patriarchal conceptions of women's "sallad"-like capabilities. In a strikingly perceptive passage, More writes on the following page that "to learn how to grow old gracefully is perhaps one of the rarest and most valuable arts which can be taught to woman" (323). Her point is that women who are taught only how to please, and specifically, to please as physical objects, are mere empty shells. When youthful flirtations and courtship have passed, such women are left without meaningful identities. Vanity, selfishness, and inconsideration thus become representative of the phenomenon by which women become willing participants in their own degradation and diminution; Christian piety and "female virtue," on the other hand, constitute a deepening of female identity by which women may become complex, interesting, and useful individuals entirely apart from their surface value in the courtship market. More demands, "Do we not educate them for a crowd, forgetting that they are to live at home? for the world, and not for themselves? for show, and not for use? for time, and not for eternity?" (323). Clearly, such protestations are aimed at endowing women with a dimension of depth and a lasting self-sufficiency, and have nothing whatsoever to do with domestic incarceration.

Such considerations cast many of More's controversial comments about women's literary aspirations into a very different light. Her critics typically refer to a few select quotes in order to illustrate her supposed antifeminism. For example, by way of discussing the "error of cultivating the imagination to the neglect of the judgment" in women's education, More writes that her proposed program for rigorous reading and close analytic study will serve to sharpen women's minds. She then appears to undercut the ambitiousness of her proposal:

> Far be it from me to desire to make scholastic ladies or female dialecticians; but there is little fear that the kind of books here recommended, if thoroughly studied, and not superficially skimmed, will make them pedants or induce conceit; for by showing them the possible powers of the human mind, you will bring them to see the littleness of their own. (345).

In a similar, apparently condescending vein, she continues,

> Neither is there any fear that this sort of reading will convert ladies into authors.– The direct contrary effect will be likely to be induced by the perusal of writers who throw the generality of readers at such an unapproachable distance as to check presumption, instead of exciting it. (345)

Read apart from More's larger considerations, and the specific purpose of the chapter in question, these passages do indeed seem to echo the derogatory and paternalist sentiments of male authors of conduct books seeking to impose strict limits on women's activities. But in context, they express her deep frustration with a system of education that inculcates women with flimsy critical thinking skills and foolish vanity regarding accomplishments that are not taken seriously outside of the drawing room – and often not even there. Her severity is necessary, she implies, in order to teach that "there is no short cut to any other kind of learning; no privileged by-path cleared from the thorns and briars of repulse and difficulty, for the accommodation of opulent inactivity or feminine weakness" (342). She criticizes, not so women will be discouraged from learning, but so they may learn well, apply their skills successfully, and in so doing, avoid the censure and ridicule of a hostile patriarchal world.

But More's most controversial statements regarding the natural capacities of women and men seem at times to mitigate this positive view of female potential. In chapter fourteen of *Strictures*, she discusses "The practical use of female knowledge, with a sketch of the female character, and a comparative view of the sexes" (363). In some ways, this is the most difficult and problematic chapter in the entire work, and it contains many oft-cited passages used to paint More as a retrograde antifeminist, or, if read in comparison with earlier chapters, as dangerously contradictory. But More's arguments here do not, in fact, stray very far from her overall purpose, and often constitute powerful expressions, not only of women's true dignity, but also of the social injustices designed to rob them of it. She opens with a re-statement of her fundamental Evangelical priority: "The chief end to be proposed in cultivating the understandings of women, is to qualify them for the practical purposes of life" (363). This, at least, is a point on which More is nothing if not consistent. She then launches into a discussion of the basic differences between men's learning and women's, and between an essentially masculine and a feminine bent of mind. These delineations have been read, without exception, as both descriptive and prescriptive – as though More is arguing that the sexes are divided thus because they *ought* to be, that gender divisions in society and education simply reflect the inherent, natural differences between the sexes. Taken on their own, however, almost all the distinctions she draws are merely descriptive; and, taken in the context of the rest of the chapter and the work as a whole, they make sense only as descriptions drawn in the interest of criticizing the status quo for women's education and encouraging women to practice serious study instead of vain dilettantism.

More observes that "[women's] knowledge is not often like the learning of men, to be reproduced in some literary composition, nor ever in any learned profession; but it is to come out in conduct"(363). This statement appears to be both descriptive and prescriptive: she is pointing out a fact of the current situation, but it is one that does not particularly trouble her. As her Evangelical commitment results in an unequivocal preference for moral praxis above all else, by her standards, if women are ideally suited to be "instrumental to the good of others," then they are fortunate to be so and should not aim elsewhere. (363). And yet, she goes on for the next three pages to argue that it is women's "false" education that prevents them from attaining true intellectual greatness. She writes,

> It is because the superficial nature of their education furnishes them with a false and low standard of intellectual excellence, that women have too often become ridiculous by the unfounded pretensions of literary vanity; for it is not the really learned, but the smatterers who have generally brought their sex into discredit, by an absurd affectation, which has set them on despising the duties of ordinary life. (363)

Here, she is clearly making the case for acquired rather than innate limitations: this is the central argument she has drawn throughout the work, beginning with her compelling opening lines. But the key phrase, "the duties of ordinary life," signals what is, for More, the noblest possible venue in which "the really learned" can apply their skills. She then descants on the cosmic significance of what she calls "economy," or household management, once again implying the specifically domestic function of women's learning. But in More's definition, home economics constitutes anything but petty trifling within a narrowly circumscribed domain; on the contrary, she envisions the entire nation and even the universe itself in terms of a large scale household, demanding proper regulation and feminine acumen. "Economy," she writes,

> is the exercise of a sound judgment, exerted in the comprehensive outline of order, of arrangements, or distribution; of regulations by which alone well governed societies, great and small, subsist. She who has the best regulated mind will [...] have the best regulated family. As in the superintendance of the universe, wisdom is seen in its *effects*; and as in the visible works of Providence that which goes on with such beautiful regularity is the result not of chance but of design [...] (363-64)

In this complex passage, it is difficult to distinguish in any straightforward way between well-governed societies and well-regulated families. Economy, which in More's usage is synonymous with home economy, is actually *responsible for* the subsistence of society. And ultimately, whether administering the family or the entire social order, economy is analogous to Providence, demanding wisdom and imagination that is no less than divine. If, therefore, women are relegated to the "practical purposes of life" in More's scheme, when economy equals the governance of society and entails a God-like wisdom, it is difficult to see how this relegation limits women's horizons in any concrete way.

After this rather radical assertion, More resumes her discussion of women's literary pretensions and continues her assault on those women who bring censure on the entire sex through their vanity and folly: be careful, she warns, that your efforts are taken seriously on their own merit, and not simply because you are young, pretty, and female. It is in the interest of being taken seriously, moreover, that More goes on to discourage women from an overly aggressive competition with men. More's own strategy in life and in her writing was to compromise when necessary and introduce change gradually and subtly. In her experience, she notes, "the most vulgar and ill-informed women are ever most inclined to be tyrants, and those always struggle most vehemently for power who feel themselves at the greatest distance from deserving it; and who would not fail to make the worst use of it when attained" (365). As always, she is here counseling women to find their greatest source of empowerment in a transcendence of worldly power games. And yet, this point leads More to her most problematic comments of all, instating complementarity rather than equality between the sexes. For a brief moment, transcendence becomes acceptance of a diminished status:

> Is it not more wise, as well as more honourable to move contentedly in the plain path which Providence has obviously marked out to the sex, and in which custom has for the most part rationally confirmed them, rather than to stray, awkwardly,

> unbecomingly and unsuccessfully, in a forbidden road? Is it not desirable to be the lawful possessors of a lesser domestic territory, rather than the turbulent usurpers of a wider foreign empire? to be good originals, than bad imitators? to be the best thing of one's own kind, rather than an inferior thing even if it were of an higher kind? to be excellent women rather than indifferent men? (366)

It is here that More comes closest to falling into precisely the kind of private/public dichotomy for which she is so roundly criticized. The problem lies in her use of the adjectives "lesser," "wider," and "higher," when a mere three pages earlier she has established the pre-eminence and all-encompassing nature of the "domestic territory." But it is a slip from which she quickly recovers. She goes on to contend that women are presently ill-suited for a "wider foreign empire" because their minds are softer, comprehending details more readily than general concepts. But, reiterating her running argument, she also contends that this softness is inculcated by the current mode of education. In a pointed retort to her own admonition, she writes,

> […] the education of women is so defective, the alleged inferiority of their minds may be accounted for on that ground, more justly than ascribing it to their natural make. And indeed, there is so much truth in the remark, that till women shall be more reasonably educated, and till the native growth of their mind shall cease to be stinted and cramped, we have no juster ground for pronouncing that their understanding has already reached its highest attainable point, than the Chinese would have for affirming that their women have attained to the great possible perfection in walking, whilst their first care is, during their infancy, to cripple their feet! (367)

This powerful passage suggests that we are to read the preceding delineations and distinctions as descriptions of existing social conditions rather than essential qualities, and certainly not as prescriptions for the ideal. With this in mind, More's observation that "A woman sees the world […] from a little elevation in her own garden, whence she makes an exact survey of home scenes, but takes not in that wider range of distant prospects which he who stands on a loftier eminence commands" implies a reality infinitely more complicated than the standard reading allows (367). Making use once more of flexible and capacious organic metaphors, More suggests that traditional efforts at cultivating women's minds have been fruitless. Native growth has been stunted by too many restrictions and enclosures, implying that women must grow freely – unclipped and unbound – if they are to reach their full potential. Of course, the very purpose of keeping women at "a little elevation in her own garden" in traditional imagery is so that they may be pruned, shaped, and bound; without these controlling efforts, the domestic garden becomes every bit as expansive as the wild landscape beyond. As any gardener knows, a rigorous and unchecked plant quickly exceeds its allotted space; the deep roots of a large and healthy tree can damage the very foundations of the house it was intended to shade. Despite every effort at containment, women, like stubborn vines, have the organic ability to grow through the cracks in the garden wall, breaking down their constraints even as they cling to them. In this picture, any notion of a boundary between what is inside and what is outside the garden – what is private and what is public – quickly deconstructs itself.

In light of this subtle redefinition of a woman's garden, More's use of adjectives such as "loftier," "wider," and "lesser" in this difficult chapter demands closer interrogation. In her Evangelical parlance, worldly greatness, high ambitions, and the pursuit of glory become code terms for presumption and foolish self-aggrandizement, and men are incited along with women to be lowly, modest, and unassuming. Perhaps, therefore, it is not too much of a stretch to interpret "lesser" as greater. And indeed, More goes on to emphasize further the distinction between women's acquired limitations and their natural potential in increasingly elevated rhetoric. Not only are women set at such an extreme disadvantage, she writes, but "we see (and who will deny that we see it frequently?) so many women nobly rising from under all the pressure of a disadvantageous education, and a defective system of society and exhibiting the most unambiguous marks of a vigorous understanding, a correct judgment, and a sterling piety" (368). The clear implication is that women *could be* capable of as yet untold feats of greatness, if only given the proper tools and training. Accordingly, More closes the chapter on a truly triumphant note, reminding us that, whatever her social status, "Christianity has exalted women to true and undisputed dignity; in Christ Jesus, as there is neither 'rich nor poor,' 'bond nor free,' so there is neither 'male nor female.'" (368).

The rhetorical progression of the chapter is indeed complicated. More's use of traditional categories and characterizations of the sexes is subtle and sometimes difficult to pin down. But she maintains a consistent focus to the end, and the overall result is a sophisticated and effective redefinition of female empowerment – sophisticated in that she ultimately manages to avoid the politically debilitating pitfalls of a purely spiritual definition, and effective especially in light of her larger, comprehensive Evangelical program. Admittedly, there is great potential here for misappropriation and misunderstanding, and More often treads a fine line between subtlety and uneasy tension; it is ironic that a writer at once so clear and concise can be, at times, so difficult to unravel. But undoubtedly there is a poignant autobiographical note in her admonitions about the dangers of being cast as a tyrannical or overly ambitious woman. If her preoccupation with being taken seriously in the man's world sometimes runs the risk of endangering her higher ideal of subverting and reforming the man's world, then perhaps it is because she herself suffered so intensely from accusations of inappropriate and unfeminine conduct. Appropriately, More often sought refuge in her own garden, at Cowslip Green and later at Barley Wood, from the frequent blows she sustained against her work and her character by angry critics. For More, the "man's world" was often a hostile place, and she found tending her rural retreat to be highly therapeutic. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that she occasionally lost her focus when discussing male critical reception of women's work, and that the woman's garden figures so prominently as an enabling ideal.

Her assertion that women see the world from a "little elevation" in their own gardens takes on even greater shades of complexity when considered in light of her larger discussion of what, exactly, constitutes a female garden. As in *Practical Piety*, she uses organic imagery and gardening metaphors to illustrate her preferred mode of education, and to convey a vision of human life in which all elements are organically interconnected. But her rhetoric is even more pointed here, and she wields her metaphors with impressive dexterity in order to promote an even greater amount of latitude in her definitions of female agency and autonomy. Once again, her primary target is the tendency to compartmentalize various spheres of life and to establish a moral double standard for the sake of expediency. As with her plan for general reform, her feminist reform works from the ground up: implanting rather than imposing, gradually and laboriously cultivating religion, virtue, and intellect. The liberating potential of her vision emerges most clearly when she conceives of women themselves as the seeds of radically new social and moral growth, in all spheres of life, as agents capable of correcting the decadence and the mindless conformity she describes with such vehemence in her other polemical essays.

More was not alone in associating women with garden imagery, and it is instructive to compare her use of organic language with traditional configurations. Indeed, women *in* gardens and woman *as* garden were common preoccupations at the close of the eighteenth-century in England (Sulloway 185-89). As More herself continually reminds us, the spectre of French contagion loomed larger than ever, and the threat of revolution struck at the heart of everything ordered and right in society. The English garden, carefully cultivated and regulated, was a powerful symbol of wilderness tamed, of man's dominion over nature. Economic and population growth during the Industrial Revolution led to increased enclosure of estate lands and estate consolidation as local gentry moved up the socio-economic ladder and attempted to solidify their newfound status (Williamson 110-11). Over the course of the eighteenth-century, gentry and aristocratic estate gardens eschewed the rigidly geometric and symmetric patterns of the previous century in favour of irregular and "natural" landscapes (Williamson 95; Streatfield 7-12). Both styles, however, required careful planning and cultivation, and both were designed to represent the superior social status of an insecure upper class (Duckworth 91-96; Williamson 95; 111).

In this climate of moral uncertainty, England's controlled landscape but also England's controlled gentlewomen were considered potential bulwarks against social disruption. The activities and morality of women, as an effective antidote to the example of French degeneration, were seen as crucial to the well-being of society as a whole. Associating the ideal Englishwoman with a proper English garden, therefore, served multiple purposes. Edmund Burke, for example, expounds on the aesthetic distinction between the sublime and the beautiful in his *Philosophical Enquiry* (1759). The aweinspiring landscape of the sublime is gendered male: untamed, rugged, and intimidating. The beautiful, on the other hand, is controlled prettiness: feminine, circumscribed, and domesticated. In a slightly different configuration, in *Strictures on Female Education: Chiefly as it Relates to the Culture of the Heart* (1787), John Bennett describes the domestic garden as man's "retirement Paradise" in which his wife/gardener tends the earth, Eve-like, and serves up "delicious pleasures" for his enjoyment and repose (qtd. in Demers 80). According to Alison G. Sulloway, "neat rows of obedient vegetation represented women as the compliant creatures over whom man had total authority" (196). Sulloway goes on to note an interesting commonality in the work of so-called "orthodox writers":

> [...] to the thoroughly orthodox man, [woman] represented a Ceres figure – a creature whose mind and body, like the minds and bodies of all similar animal or vegetable kinds, moved at slow, predictable rates, depending largely upon the husband's tillage or his pastoral care of her; and eventually, in the fullness of time, his child in her womb – usually described as a son – emerged. (190)

The example of Ceres is striking, as it demonstrates the ambiguity and the instability of symbolic representations meant to fix and contain women. Ceres, of course, is known primarily *not* for her dependence or predictability but as the devoted mother of a *daughter* whose rape provokes inconsolable lament and cosmic vengeance. The ambiguity of Ceres is appropriate insofar as the urge to associate the organic or the natural with the feminine in order to tame and control belies a fearful awareness of the power of both: for every artistic or literary representation of wilderness subdued, history is replete with images of man at the mercy of nature angry and uncontrolled. On the other hand, Ceres was above all worshipped as a benevolent provider, maternal but all-powerful. The metaphor, like the women it is supposed to represent, reveals inherent tensions within the discourse and defies static containment.

In More's usage, not surprisingly, both the idealized and the demonized conceptions of the organic as feminine are rejected in favour of a practical configuration stressing the diligent labour of the maternal gardener and the wholesome vitality of her carefully tended pupils. Her goal, of course, is to enrich the "shallow soil" so that women may produce lasting fruits instead of "indifferent cresses." And, in stark contrast to the "neat rows of obedient vegetation" invoked in traditional imagery, More's Evangelical vision ensures *unceasing* activity – a vigorous and positive growth that will spread to counteract and eventually choke out the contagion of revolutionary discord and Enlightenment irreligion. More desires the feminine garden, not to stand as impassive and static bulwark, but to embody a dynamism that is ever-expanding in its effects, sending out shoots of new life in all directions.

This sense of dynamism and vitality pervades More's vision of ideal femininity. And, as with all of her rhetorical devices, this pervasive sense is tuned to pragmatic effect. The ideal maternal educator, like More herself with her Mendip schools, must possess the intuition and flexibility to respond appropriately to real-life situations. She is not abstractly theorizing: thus, she insists that "We cannot educate by a *receipt* […] much must depend upon contingent circumstances, for that which is good may yet be inapplicable" (338). Here, she again articulates a kind of supra-political program for social reform: her insistence on a pedagogical sensitivity to the needs of her "students" precludes a radical or revolutionary stance while at the same time transcending the stock conservative fear of change. Improvement is necessary, but must be introduced in ways amenable to the temper of the times. Or, rather, improvement is only possible *if* it is implemented organically: as she writes, "The cultivator of the human mind, must like the gardener, study diversities of soil, or he may plant diligently and water faithfully with little fruit" (338). More's rhetoric mirrors the philosophy propounded therein: gently coaxing or subduing the "prolific hydra" of error and vice with the pruning shears of discipline and self-denial as the occasion demands (327).

Accordingly, the products of such efforts will be characterized by a similar vigour and enterprise. The strength of will and body that allows a woman to stand up to the world to declare that she will not act is a logical development in young girls More would like to see "bounding with the unrestrained freedom of little wood nymphs over hill and dale, their cheeks flushed with health, and their hearts overflowing with happiness" (327). Invoking a wholesome picture of Evangelical industry and (perhaps romanticized) rural health, More's vision of movement, dynamism, fresh air, labour, and diligence contradicts sharply the fashion of the day, which encouraged pale, dull, languid creatures rendered immobile by corsets and false propriety. Her vision is therefore very much in line with Wollstonecraft's desire to "shew that elegance is inferior to virtue" (112) – although More contends that elegance is not only inferior, but when defined in terms of social and patriarchal prerogatives, it is downright false and illusory.

More's exposure of worldly illusions continues through to the concluding lines of *Strictures*. The final three chapters are taken up with a lengthy explication of her Evangelical theology, their explicitly pious content indicated by the chapter headings, "A worldly spirit incompatible with the spirit of Christianity," "On the leading doctrines of Christianity, with a sketch of the Christian character," and "On the duty and efficacy of prayer." Although these chapters seem a departure from the ostensible purposes of the tract, and touch little on the education of women, it is towards this more general theological discussion that the work as a whole progresses from the outset. Here, More's ongoing critique of social values, fashionable conduct, and her concomitant discussion of women's inestimable importance in the social scheme, come full circle as she reiterates the call to active virtue first set forth in *Thoughts* and *Estimate,* here with the feminine pronoun:

> Neither does a Christian's piety consist in living in retreat, and railing at the practices of the world, while perhaps her heart is full of the spirit of that world at which she is railing: but it consists in subduing the spirit of the world, resisting its temptations, and opposing its practices, even while her duty obliges her to live in it. (*Strictures* 399)

More's radical rejection of social role-playing is therefore rooted in a religious imperative: behaviour and spirit, "benevolent actions" and "purest motives" must be unified in the interest of Christian integrity. This aspect, of course, differentiates More from modern existentialists: autonomy and freedom are not left open for the individual to define for him or herself, but are defined in terms of her very particular understanding of "that liberty wherewith Christ has made us free" (401). While anyone who disagrees with this understanding might hesitate to consider it freedom at all, it provides nonetheless a powerful impetus and justification to "fly in the face of custom" and "oppose the torrent of fashion" (401). Although clothed in Evangelical garb, this is strong, counter-cultural rhetoric, inciting readers to view critically their "local standard of goodness," which is man-made, ephemeral, and to be observed only for the sake of convenience, in contrast to the gospels' "universal" standard, which trumps all worldly conventions – including those which constrain and devalue women (402).

The effects of More's counter-cultural rhetoric – the political potential of her religious definition of authenticity and female empowerment – are aptly illustrated in the conclusion of Austen's *Mansfield Park.* After defying her uncle, Fanny is exiled to her childhood home in Portsmouth, so that "a little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Manfield Park" might teach her a lesson, and render her appropriately grateful for Henry Crawford's marriage proposal (298). But when the Bertrams' eldest, married daughter Maria runs off with Henry, the crisis effectively exonerates Fanny and proves all of her misgivings correct. Henry is shown to be an inconstant rake, and his sister Mary, disturbed more at the public exposure than the immorality of the dalliance, reveals the moral bankruptcy beneath her veneer of attractive femininity. Fanny's moral fortitude and constancy in times of trial, on the other hand, does more than earn her the affections of her beloved Edmund; her steadying presence proves instructive for the much-humbled Sir Thomas. As if quoting from *Strictures* itself, Sir Thomas reflects that the fatal shortcomings of his daughters resulted from his own failures as a father and educator. He realizes with dismay "the most direful mistake in his plan of education":

> Something must have been wanting *within* [...]. He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments – the authorized object of their youth – could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. (377)

There is some gratification to be had in the fact that, after castigating Fanny so brutally and unjustly, Sir Thomas is "the longest to suffer" in the end from an awareness of the "errors in his own conduct as a parent"(376). But more important, of course, is the fact that Fanny's quiet but stalwart resistance to playing out her uncle's script effects a complete reformation of the entire household: her refusal to marry Crawford precipitates the revelation of his true nature and exposes Sir Thomas's dire failings, while Fanny herself comes to constitute the moral centre of the family and the novel as a whole. Maria is not ultimately vilified or mercilessly cast out, because the onus for her grave mistake, and indeed, for all of the moral imbalances at Mansfield Park, is placed squarely on the shoulders of the patriarch. As the sole redeeming presence, the long-neglected and maligned Fanny proves an effective agent of change and a surprising heroine after all. Her refusal to "act" in performance allows her to act in reality, to engage in authentic relationships, to be a "real human being" rather than an extension of male imagination. Unlike Mary, who allows and even wills herself to be objectified by Edmund's refusal to see her truly, Fanny's modesty and seeming submission become radical demands for a recognition of her own unique subjectivity. This is precisely what More envisioned for her own Evangelical reformation – that women, "at once firm and feminine," would, through their own actualization as rational, moral subjects, become positive forces of influence and instruction (*Strictures* 313).

Conclusion

Beyond the Gender Binary: Hannah More's Critical Legacy

Reflecting on the Orlando Project, a group based at the University of Alberta and formed to produce the first large-scale history of women's writing in the British Isles, Betty A. Schellenberg asks some provocative questions about "how to fix what feminist literary history has done to the mid-eighteenth-century woman writer" (74). While Schellenberg focuses on this particular period, her observations and criticisms apply to the critical practices of eighteenth-century feminist studies in general, as well as to a much wider range of feminist literary history. Her critique, tactful but trenchant, takes to task the authoritative explanatory model that reduces women writers to an impossible fate of transgression or submission. This model, which uses gender as the fundamental binary cause, is "oppositional and inevitably value-laden," dichotomizing "male and female, mediator and supplicant, surface and depth, orthodox and subversive, appropriated and feminist" (75).

Simplistic and polarizing, the binary model has often served to re-create patriarchal hierarchies instead of interrogating and deconstructing them. It has also served to elide the unique contributions of individual women writers in blanket categorizations along traditional ideological lines. While male literary giants of the period, such as Samuel Johnson, Laurence Sterne, and Tobias Smollett, continue to be read each as definitive or paradigmatic in his own right, the contributions of women writers such as Charlotte Lennox, Sarah Fielding, and Frances Burney are usually categorized collectively as representing something "definably uniform: the female literary career"

(80). Alternately, women writers are often understood in terms of their relationship to their powerful male patrons and mentors. Divided neatly between the definitively female and transgressive and the male-derivative and submissive, the former can only be defined negatively as *essentially* marginal, while women writers of the latter camp continue to languish in the shadows, for "few have wanted to look twice at what could be so easily dismissed as didactic, imitative, uninteresting" (77).

Schellenberg elaborates using the example of Charlotte Lennox, whose 1752 novel *The Female Quixote* has been read by different critics as alternately transgressive *and* submissive. Lennox's heroine, Arabella, has become deluded by reading French heroic romances, but is duly "converted" through a dialogue with a "Pious and Learned" clergyman to a "recognition of her place as an heiress in the mid-century economy of courtship and marriage" (Schellenberg 80). Most controversially, Arabella is directed to Richardson's *Clarissa* as the ideal guide for her own behaviour. For many feminist critics, the realm of romance and imagination is here feminized, then devalued and abandoned as Arabella submits herself to male "reality." Schellenberg notes that

> given the immodesty of Lennox's self-assertion as an author, and the vicissitudes of her own marriage, this moral cannot, according to our explanatory model, be Lennox's intention; either the apparent conservatism is a cover for a radical critique of eighteenth-century marriage practices and ideals of female propriety or it is simply not Lennox's at all. (80)

Both interpretations, the latter proffered by unsubstantiated claims that it was actually Johnson who wrote the conversion chapter, continue to persist in contemporary criticism. According to Schellenberg, these two interpretive options demonstrate the extent to which the authoritative explanatory model is insufficient to help us understand the contributions and perspectives of individual women writers: "Not only do both of these explanations [...] – Lennox as subversive-in-hiding and Lennox as author forced to abdicate – require that Lennox be stripped of agency at the most significant moment in her narrative, but they are simply unconvincing [...]" (81). In Schellenberg's reading, Lennox was neither "transgressive" in contemporary terms nor was she acting as the mouthpiece for Johnson's conservatism. For Schellenberg, the interesting work begins when we endeavour to ask how and why Lennox self-consciously chose to uphold the "hierarchies of gender and reading upon which her plot is constructed" (81).

Hannah More constitutes an interesting counterpoint to the example of Charlotte Lennox. In some ways, More's "apparent conservatism," articulated explicitly in nonfiction essays and in a novel that is overtly didactic, is too obviously intentional to be interpreted as disguised radicalism or inadvertent ventriloquism.[8] But as I argued in Chapter Two, More also defies static political categorization when she instates a maternal, pedagogical model of female-led social change in the place of conservative, liberal, *and* radical agendas. While Lennox's authorial integrity and agency are diminished in this schema by virtue of her place in the "oppressed" category of the fundamental gender binary, More's agency is recognized all too clearly. But she is vilified for it. More too is seen as complying with the patriarchal prerogatives of Johnson and other influential men, but her perceived failure to challenge the status quo is compounded by her success, financial and otherwise, won apparently by subjecting other women to the proscriptions she herself managed to avoid by aligning herself with male authority. Arguably, no woman writer fits comfortably into the explanatory model identified by Schellenberg. But Hannah More – by virtue of her remarkable commercial success, her undeniable self-sufficiency, and most importantly, her unprecedented public prominence and cultural status – constitutes an outright affront to the fundamental gender binary and to many traditional feminist conceptions. Combining political conservatism with an Evangelical counter-cultural edge, rejecting both the traditional conception of objectified, passive femininity *and* secular, Enlightenment conceptions of universal equality and liberty, championing a version of Christianity so radical and rigid that it actually undermines patriarchal systems of power and oppression, More herself, as a complex historical figure, and her unique vision of social reform, simply confound contemporary feminist theories.

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[8] Although Charles H. Ford does in fact read More as a strategic subversive in his work, *Hannah More: A Critical Biography*. See Chapter One, pp. 21-22.

If, as Schellenberg asserts, prominent male literary figures are understood and appreciated in terms of the singularity of their contributions, while women writers are valued insofar as they conform to the generalized conception of the "female literary career," then the more "unique" or resistant to explanatory models an individual woman writer proves, the less able we are to understand her place in literary history. Consequently, in a strange twist of irony, some aspects of feminist ideology have actually served to interfere with the project of treating, in this case, eighteenth-century women writers as autonomous authors worth reading on their own merit. Perhaps More's intense concern with the integrity, authenticity, and agency of the individual woman, as opposed to the universalized language of rights and liberation, reflects a prescient awareness of her own singularity, and expresses a clear demand to be taken seriously on her own terms, rather than as an easily caricatured "female polemic," a "Bishop in petticoats," slavish disciple of Johnson, minion of Wilberforce, or hypocritical oppressor of women, traitor to the feminist cause. Being herself so indomitably resistant to reductionistic roles, she sought to deconstruct and make ridiculous the limiting and demeaning roles available to women in general.

More's rejection of a public/private dichotomy on religious grounds challenges long-held beliefs about the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century marginalization of middle-class women – beliefs that persist despite recent historiographical reappraisals. Her rejection of this dichotomy renders her insistence on natural sexual differences and women's domesticity an effective means of undermining patriarchal authority and expanding traditional conceptions of femininity. Far from upholding a gendered separation of spheres, More invests traditional women's work with religious and political significance while she rejects the values of the public domain, entreating men to submit themselves to the feminizing morality of Evangelical piety. Finally, she invests women's economic activities with religious import, and makes of the Gospel demand for productivity a sanctification for female agency in all domains of social life.

In my reassessment of More's contribution to literary and gender history, I have tried to defend her work from unsubstantiated or misguided criticisms without glossing over her many rough edges. Indeed, by recognizing the positive aspects of her contribution in plain view of these rough edges, I have sought to move beyond a tendency in feminist literary history to either vilify or sanctify. My point has not been to idealize More, but to show how her work actually constitutes a radical challenge to what Schellenberg calls a "deeply entrenched way of seeing" in feminist inquiry (79). To this end, I think it is important to stress not only how we can better understand More in her own time, but also the ways in which further study and greater recognition of her insights and difficulties can lead to the development of theoretical models that are more inclusive and fruitful, and in turn, to feminist discourse that is more nuanced and effective.

One problematic feature of this "deeply entrenched way of seeing" has been a reductionistic approach to religion and the important part that religious belief and practice have played in the lives of women historically. In formulating a more nuanced feminist response to the history of women and religion, More's work could be especially instructive. A very small handful of scholars are only beginning to heed the admonition delivered in Gail Malmgreen's 1986 book on *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760-1930*. Here, Malmgreen argues that

> Feminist historians should not forget that women took to the public platform on behalf of religion long before they were stirred by politics; that women left the home in droves to conduct Sunday schools and prayer-meetings long before they campaigned for professional training, and that religious writing offered middle-class women a chance to be self-supporting even before the heyday of the great female novelists. (5)

More recently, Elisabeth Jay notes, in light of the historical significance of religion in the lives of women and in the development of modern feminism, "it is at first sight surprising how little work, comparatively speaking, has been done by historians of gender in this aspect of cultural history" (Jay 2003; 2). Despite the fact that women's early active participation in religious organisations and religious discourses effectively paved the way for the widespread institutional changes of the twentieth-century, feminist critics continue to see traditional religion and later, secular advancements for women as essentially opposed.

But for Jay, in her introduction to a special section on Religion and Culture in the 2003 issue of *Nineteenth-Century Studies*, the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath have effected a significant change in the way academics in general treat religion. Whether it is perceived positively as a spiritual resource finally being rediscovered by the materialist West, or as a "dangerously irrational sanction to political, economic, racial, and moral agendas," Jay observes that "religion is no longer dismissed as an outdated irrelevance in cultural debate" (1-2). While Schellenberg focuses on the eighteenth-century, Jay's interest is the nineteenth; and like Judith M. Bennett's discussion of medieval and early modern feminisms and Amanda Vickery's response to seventeenth-century feminist scholarship, Jay takes issue with the same "feminist-Marxist axis" that continues to predominate in studies of Victorian women (Jay 2003; 3). As I discussed in Chapter One, Bennett and Vickery focus on the limitations and over-simplifications of the Marxist meta-narrative when it comes to women's economic and social history and especially the history of women's work. On a related note, Jay identifies a similar reductionism which sees "in religious belief and practice the fulcrum on which Victorian patriarchalism turned" (3). An *a priori* assumption that Victorian religion acted "as the main prop of the dominant ideology" has tended

> to position women, on a model complicated only by class, as 'the oppressed' and to marshal the teeming variety of religious beliefs and practices into simply structured cohorts, labeled *Evangelical* or *Calvinist* (universally bad), *Oxford movement* or *Tractarian* (particularly bad for women), and *Dissenting* (good as a political attitude, almost always bad in its religious practices). Religious affiliations falling outside this spectrum, such as Jewish or Roman Catholic, scarcely [merit] a mention. (3)

Jay would like to see this "monochrome picture of a Victorian Christianity" dissolved so that the complex range of women's experiences and the decisive role played by women's genuine and varied religious beliefs and practices may be more adequately understood (3). On the contemporary global stage, Western intellectuals and politicians must now find ways of approaching and conversing with the richly complicated varieties of human religiosity; feminist scholars too need to find ways of treating religion with greater dexterity and subtlety if they are to engage with relevant issues in the greater world outside of the academy.

To this end, More's work illuminates the ways in which a seemingly conservative religious commitment can be used to invest the otherwise "oppressed" with authority and political leverage, and, in particular, how radical expressions of Christianity can be used to undermine power structures and to blur distinctions in social and gender hierarchies. At the same time, her rigid moralism and her insistence on maintaining social "fences," while enabling on some levels, also demonstrates the limits, or perhaps the cost, of such radicalism. As a check against the reductionism of social scientific models, More's ingenious, proto-existentialist deconstruction of social performance preserves a space for individual uniqueness and agency while at the same time recognizing the pervasive influence of socially constructed reality. On an abstract level – but perhaps most importantly for our contemporary situation – the fact that More vehemently rejects the terms and categories of Enlightenment discourse on the grounds that they undermine divine authority for the sake of man's aggrandizement serves as a crucial reminder that, even within the history of Western thought, conceptions of what constitutes freedom are varied and sometimes irreconcilable.

According to Jay, "religion's power lies in its capacity to transgress boundaries: it is also disruptive of some of the traditional frameworks within which the separate academic disciplines have worked" (6). Arguably, religion in its more radical forms is an *essentially* transgressive and subversive force, in any historical context. Certainly, Hannah More, as the high priestess of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Evangelicalism, transgresses boundaries – not only those of gender in her historical time and place, but also of our own, contemporary critical orthodoxies. While it is no longer dangerous in this context for a woman to claim intellectual and moral authority, we have our own blind spots and taboos. It is sign of her lasting relevance and inimitable integrity that Hannah More causes as much discomfort today as she did two hundred years ago. It is precisely this discomfort that creates an imperative for further study, to look for greater insights about ourselves in the life and work of a woman who would have relished the opportunity to teach us all a lesson or two.

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